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JULY

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by **TOM BLACKBURN**

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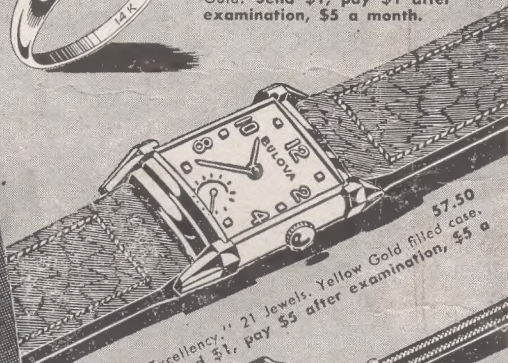
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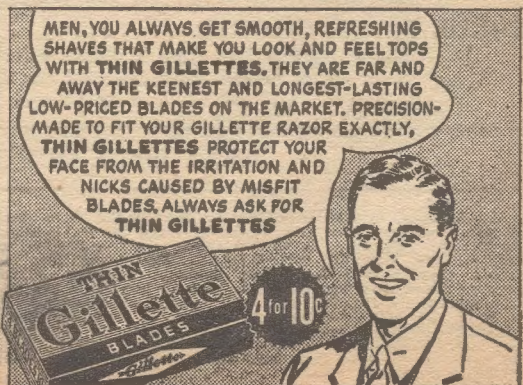
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MAGAZINE

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Vol. 21

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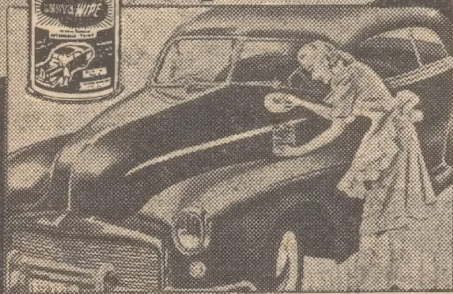
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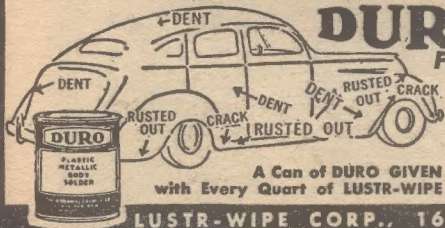
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HELL CUTS LOOSE A GUN-WOLF

Thrilling Novel of the Border

By Tom W. Blackburn



**Not the death-magic of Espal-
da's gleaming steel, the rene-
gade lawman's guns, nor the bit-
ter need for help that he read
in the girl's terrified eyes,
could turn Garland from the
lonely, perilous trail he'd sworn
to follow — straight from the
walls of Yuma Prison to a deso-
late, unmarked grave!**

CHAPTER ONE

"Here's Lead in Your Back!"

GARLAND came out of the rocky hills in gray dusk and pulled up to look at the country ahead. He felt impersonally sorry for the bony horse he had bought in Yuma four days before, but he held its head up with an iron hand on the reins.



Before he knew it, Ram-
sey had fired twice

Below was a small valley, narrow at the near end and fanning out to the south to vanish in the encroaching shadows of night. He saw a house at the foot of the

slopes, but no smoke at the chimney—unusual, at this hour. An icy wind carried the immediate promise of rain. Shrugging, he found the trail slanting down. This was no night to stay in the open.

The track switched twice on the face of the slope, traversed a sparse brush thicket, and widened into a well-defined stock path. This terminated at the valley edge against a poor man's gate—a rusted portal in a wire fence which had been trampled flat a little distance beyond. Cattle had moved through the gap recently. A lot of them. Garland dismounted stiffly and approached the gate. As he fumbled at its loops, there was a whisper of movement behind him. Before he could turn, something rammed hard into his back.

"Hold fast, Espalda! Keep your hands where I can see them!"

Garland was doubly startled. The ragged voice was a woman's contralto. It was angry and as unsteady as the shotgun muzzling his spine. But there was no arguing with a big smoothbore at this range, unsteady or not. He spoke quietly. "You're making a mistake. My name isn't Espalda."

Years of habit had reduced his voice to a murmur, soft, clipped, economical of effort. Cell talk.

"No?" the woman answered unpleasantly. "Who are you, then?"

Garland hesitated. His name? Another had made it infamous. This was his reason for his presence in these hills.

"Pull light on those triggers, Ma'am," he said. "I'm going to turn."

He heard the woman go back a step in the deepening darkness, cautious but certain enough he'd be careful because of the twin-barreled killer in her hands. He was sardonically amused. A powder-maker couldn't dream up a combination more dangerous than a nervous woman and a scattergun. He groped for a match in his breast pocket and snapped it alight against

his thumbnail. He lifted the flame and shielded it for steadiness. He knew what the woman would see. A pronounced pallor across a face deeply lined for its obvious youth. A man dressed in the cheap hat, shirt, levis and shoes with which they started a man out from Yuma when his stretch was done. With the flame in his eyes, he spoke again.

"Do I look like I'd be called Espalda?" he asked.

"No," the woman conceded uneasily. "But who are you?"

"A drifter," Garland said. "Let it go at that. Call me Gar. That'll do. Who are you?"

"Tess Milburn—"

HIS eyes adjusted to the flame, Garland could see her. A girl, more than a woman. Slender, surprisingly near his own height. Levis, rolled at the cuff, a faded denim jacket, a battered hat canted rakishly and carelessly back on a jet cascade of hair. Pretty, he supposed—maybe even beautiful. He wasn't sure; it had been a long time since he had seen a woman.

"Your ranch?" he asked, with a nod toward the gate.

"My father's. He's in the Tucson hospital."

"You usually out looking for company at this hour and in this weather?"

"When I'm alone and I don't think I'll like the company," the girl agreed.

"Who is Espalda, then, that you've got this double-barreled welcome for him?"

"Bob Ramsay's crew boss. A friendly *cholo* slid out of the brush this evening to tell me he was coming this way."

"Ramsay?" Garland asked softly, making something sibilant of the name. He hoped the dying match let darkness conceal the sudden set of his face.

"Yes. The King of the Border," the girl said, acidly scornful. "A bullying

coward who couldn't ride a horse without a Spanish bit and razor spurs, or talk to an honest man without a club in his hand!"

A woman's viewpoint, formed in hot anger. Garland, from bitter experience, knew the man was something more than that.

"Bob Ramsay—" he said, "I'm going to see him—"

The girl made a brusque gesture over her shoulder.

"Move on south, then," she snapped. "Everything that way is his country; right here is mine!"

"You misunderstand," Garland said. "I'm not Ramsay's friend."

That simple statement, spoken without forcefulness, but somehow with a shadow of the things in Garland's heart behind it, lay between himself and the girl in the darkness. He wished he could see her face. He knew that she was thinking over the words, one by one. Rain began to fall gently. The girl drew a long breath.

"If you're willing to hock your handgun," she said, "you're welcome to the house for bacon and beans."

Garland lifted his face to the drizzle, considering the offer. He had ridden hard since leaving Yuma. Impatience, long contained, was acid in him, driving him relentlessly. This was not the end of his trail; this was not the place he wanted to reach. He did not want to stay. But there was something arresting in this matter-of-fact invitation to him, a stranger, from this girl who had been waiting at her gate for another man with a loaded gun in her hands. She had said Ramsay country lay to the south—close. And Ramsay might have known the day of his release and could be expecting him. This might be a trap, but it seemed unlikely. Tess Milburn didn't seem the kind of a woman who would be loyal to Ramsay. And the rain was coming harder. He could not keep

her waiting any longer in this weather.

"Thanks," he said. "This old bag of bones under my saddle is about done in. Can I get him under cover?"

"Of course," Tess Milburn agreed. "I'll show you the barn."

She waited, nevertheless. Garland unbuckled his belt, hesitated a moment, then shrugged and surrendered it. The girl looped belt and weapon over her arm. They went through the gate together.

RELAXED in kitchen warmth and watching the girl working at the kindled stove, Garland ran his impression of this place through his mind, searching again for something which might tie it to the man whose death he had been so long planning.

It was a poverty spread if he had ever seen one. Wind had stripped half of the shingles from the roof of the barn in which he had given his jaded horse a rubdown and a bait of dusty oats. The other out-buildings were in as poor repair and apparently empty. A sizeable bunkhouse with web-coated windows. A pole corral, falling apart and indifferently patched. A tool shed with unhinged doors. More than the inevitable bad seasons of an arid country and the passage of time had pulled this ranch apart. He found that curiosity about this was wedging itself into his impatience to reach Bob Ramsay.

Tess Milburn had changed when they reached the house. Partly for comfort, partly because the rain had caught them hard in the yard and she was wet, and partly Garland supposed, out of a woman's vanity. She had put on a clean, slightly faded blue calico dress with short puffed sleeves and a skirt which flared as she moved.

She was beautiful. In the preoccupation of cooking, the strain eased from her face. She smiled occasionally at him, quick and friendly smiles which betrayed her

loneliness here. He had dreamed of a girl such as this once, in other days and other places. But Yuma lay between him and dreaming, now. Yuma and the knowledge that when the chips went down, the odds would be high against him.

He closed his mind, narrowing it down until it embraced only this ranch, this room, this night—and this girl. . . .

Tess Milburn set her hot dishes on the table and beckoned to him.

"Ready," she said. "Biscuits are done, though they aren't very good, I'm afraid. They never are—when I want them to be. Pull up a chair, Gar."

Garland ate ravenously, with a hunger which went beyond the needs of his belly. He cleaned out everything set before him, at last leaning back with a sign of repletion, and began to build himself a smoke. He was looking at the girl, a faint smile about his mouth, when a soft sound reached the room from outside.

The warmth in the girl's eyes vanished. She stiffened, kicked over her chair in her haste to come up out of it, and with a short swing of her arm, she batted the little glass-shaded lamp to the floor. Light was snuffed for a moment, but a spark caught spilled oil. Catching his jacket up from a chair-back, Garland swung it swiftly at the flame, smothered it. Stepping around the table, he touched the girl's arm and felt it trembling; knew she was on the verge of hysteria.

"Why did you do that?" he asked her.

"That sound—there's somebody in the yard!" she whispered, half in terror.

"That sound," Garland said steadily, "was a brush squirrel jumping from one angle of the roof to another. I've heard them too many times to be mistaken—and so have you. Look, Miss Milburn, there isn't anything in the world worth being that frightened about."

The girl sagged against him for a moment.

"You don't know Bob Ramsay!" she breathed bitterly.

"No?" Garland asked with harsh irony. "Suppose you tell me about him, then."

CHAPTER TWO

Espalda's Steel Is Sharp

THE girl's story was neither complicated nor unusual in pattern. Reaching for a fork, she drew an inverted triangle on the oilcloth cover of the table.

"Up here," she said, "side by side across the wide top of this triangle, are the Glasgow Cattle Syndicate's spread and the Star Land and Cattle Company's outfit. Both of them run by local managers; both owning thousands of head of stock and much too busy inside their own boundaries to worry about anything else. Below them, here in the point of the triangle, where the hills run together, is our place—the Cross X. Below us, to the south, is the border—"

"You're the tip of a funnel, eh?" Garland nodded in understanding.

"A funnel used to pour running stock from the big outfits north of us on across the border," the girl said.

"Ramsay's running the wet-backs?" Garland asked.

"Yes," Tess Milburn said. "Across the Cross X. He tried to buy dad and me out at a ridiculous figure. But this is dad's country and his place, and we refused to sell. Ramsay is stubborn when he wants something and there's no limit to what he'll do to get it."

"Yes," Garland agreed in a bitter murmur.

"Our stock went first—all of it worth stealing. And our hands were driven off. Beaten, bullied, hired away. Ramsay couldn't even wait till the day came when we could no longer pay them and would have to let them go of our own accord."

"Where's the law?" Garland asked.

The girl's lips curled. "At Rimrock, the county seat, a hundred and forty miles away. And it's staying there. We've written twice to Billam, the sheriff, but he's never showed up. We haven't many votes and don't pay much in taxes at this end of the county."

Garland was silent for a moment, watching her. There was no hysteria now. Resolve was as strong as her fear—stronger. He came to a question he'd wanted to avoid.

"Your—your father?"

"A bullet touched his right lung. He's improving. They told me in Tucson that he'd be back in a month. A month isn't long, Gar. I can hold out that long."

"Sure," Garland said. He stood up abruptly. It was too wet outside to ride farther tonight, he told himself. He could not bring himself to admit that he was staying because of the bright defiance in a girl's eyes. He had planned this ride for six years; he had known the girl but a few hours.

"I'll move into the bunkhouse for the night if you don't mind," he said quietly.

The girl seemed startled that the hour had grown so late. She seemed disappointed that the evening had come to an end. He thought it had been a long time since she had been able to talk to anyone—to share her problems and fears. It meant something to him that she had asked no questions and that she had spoken freely after the first few minutes of scrutiny when they reached the house. Perhaps a time in prison did not mar a man as much as he had thought.

She found a candle, saw him out the back door with a pleasant good night.

In the bunkhouse, alone, with the candle on a deeply dust-grimed box, some ease came to Garland. The fierce urge which had driven him eastward from Yuma relaxed a little. Weariness, perhaps, brought his mind a certain clarity—the realization

that no man's problems were much greater than those of his fellows; a moment of insight in which his hatred of Bob Ramsay seemed cancerous, self-destructive. Then the moment passed and his grimness returned. Destruction of self again became unimportant. Bob Ramsay was the cancer. His death became the only thing left that was worth while. Garland snuffed the candle.

He did not know how long it had been—no more than a few minutes, certainly—when he heard the horses in the yard. He rose and moved swiftly to a grimed window.

Across the kitchen lot the lamp was still burning in the house. Tess Milburn was still at grips with her thoughts and unwilling to meet them in the darkness. The rain was kicking up spray from the hardpan of the yard so that a soft mist seemed to cling to the ground. He could see no movement, no intruder. But there were horses in the yard, somewhere.

He slipped out the door and moved silently through the yard, telling himself that this was Ramsay's work—sending men and horses into this broken ranch in the storm—and that Ramsay might be here. He crouched low, thinking that this might be the end of his trail—that he might not have to wait until tomorrow. All of the time, he knew that Ramsey did not count in his thinking now. Only the girl mattered. A girl should not live in fear under her own roof.

Without risking a knock, Garland slipped the blade of his clasp-knife into the joint of the kitchen door and noiselessly raised its catch. He stepped in as Tess Milburn crossed the kitchen doorway, coming from her bedroom for the lamp. She stopped in startled fear which turned to anger, contained but bitter, as she recognized him. She clutched her robe about her and moved so that her bare feet were on a throwrug in the doorway in-

stead of on the chill pine floor. Garland's gun and belt dangled from the chair on which she had left them. The girl's eyes touched them and snapped back to Garland. Her eyes spoke as plainly as her lips could have spoken: *I trusted you!*

Garland shook his head with quick, cautioning impatience. "Your company's arrived, after all—" he said.

The girl said, "You'd better go, Mister—" Then her voice died abruptly, her eyes lifting beyond him.

Garland wheeled. He caught a glimpse of a flat, scarred face under a rain-soaked, peaked sombrero, at the kitchen window. Lunging across the room, he blew out the lamp.

"Espalda?" he whispered.

"Yes. He rode this way once with Ramsay," the girl said unsteadily. "The only one of his men I know—"

GARLAND caught up his gunbelt and buckled it on, crossed to the door. Tess moved, too. She caught his arm.

"No, Gar!" she said sharply. Garland freed his arm gently.

"I'm afraid I don't like your uninvited company, either. I'll get rid of him."

"No—don't go out there!" the girl urged. "That man is deadly with a knife!"

Garland hesitated, brought up short by the thought that death was waiting outside in the rain.

"Take the front door, Gar," Tess whispered. "Get out of here. The rain will cover you. Espalda is my problem, not yours."

"I don't like him," Garland said steadily. "He's Ramsay's man. You sure it's your ranch that Ramsay wants?"

"No," Tess admitted. "Espalda isn't after the ranch, tonight. But I've got the shotgun—"

"Get the gun," Garland told her swiftly. "Use one barrel for anybody trying to force a door or window. Save the other

one—always keep a loaded chamber. When I want back in, I'll rap once. No more. Understand?"

"Yes. But Gar—"

"Quiet!" he commanded fiercely. Then, obeying an impulse he had thought permanently dead—corroded beyond rebirth by his bitterness and the single line of the hatred he had nursed so long, he slipped his arm around the girl in the close darkness of the kitchen. He meant it to be a heartening gesture, but it became something more. Her hair was momentarily against his cheek. He breathed deep of a rich scent long forgotten, and under a compulsion beyond his control, Garland bent his head. Her face was uptilted. He kissed her. Then, before he could know her reaction, he roughly released her, pulled the door open and slid into the wet night.

The rain was still falling heavily. Ducking aside from the door, Garland flattened his back against the outer kitchen wall. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing but the rain. But he could feel the presence of another man—close. He waited, patiently, knowing that the man at the window had seen him in the kitchen and must have heard him come out.

Slowly, silently, he eased himself down, an inch out from the wall, first to his knee, then further still until his body was as small a target as he could make it. He balanced there, probing the darkness with every sense alert. There was no sound, no answering movement. Garland grinned tightly, measured his breath carefully and coughed—a small, apparently involuntary sound.

There was an almost instantaneous whisper of motion, a rustle of damp clothing, a grunt as the man in the darkness made his cast. Death breathed in chill, swift passage against Garland's cheek. A knife went home in the weathered siding

behind him with the solid sound of keen steel driving into wood. The blade was only inches above Garland's head. Had he been standing, it would have struck his belly. Espalda knew where a blade should go for the most certain damage.

Garland spilled noiselessly over on one side, his hand out to support himself, until he was almost flat on the ground along the wall of the house. It was a fluid change of position, still further reducing the size of the target he offered. A man who threw steel so well and silently would have more than one blade at his belt. He would have curiosity as to the success of his throw, and another knife ready in case the first cast had been insufficient. With the wet ground under him, Garland waited with the terrible patience Yuma taught those who came within her walls.

CHAPTER THREE

The Second Visitor

ESPALDA came, padding up so silently that he was over Garland before the man on the ground was aware he had changed position. With that awareness, came instant action. Garland twisted over and lunged upward with the driving power of his tensed leg muscles behind his body. One hand stabbed, clawed, and locked on the border man's arm. The other, balled in a hard fist, swung savagely at Espalda's head.

"Dios! Madre mia!"

The cry broke off, shattered by the impact of Garland's blow. The man's nose spread and his teeth sprung inward under Garland's knuckles. Espalda went down, Garland with him, sliding his gun free. Stunned, the border man was still a snarling, fighting cat. He twisted like a snake, another blade in his hand. As Garland chopped down with the barrel of his gun, he felt the keen bite of the edged weapon along the corded muscles of his

left forearm. Espalda went limp under the impact of the gun barrel. Garland rose unsteadily, reaction shaking him. . . .

He remembered so clearly then, the crowded, stifling courtroom. And he remembered a dusty street beyond smudged windows; the small voices of testimony Bob Ramsay had hired, making a towering legend out of simple falsehood. Testimony that the man on trial was one of the old border kind who killed for the same stimulus other men found in drink and women; that he killed as easily and coolly as he ate. The charges were ridiculous on the face of them. Such a man never lived. There was always reaction—a little sickening—which shook the roots of the most callous. Garland knew. In Yuma, he had known some of the worst.

"Damn you!" Garland breathed now, the violence ebbing swiftly in him. He nudged the inert figure on the ground with his toe. Not strongly; he had no hate for Espalda, only weary disgust for the kind he represented. Bending, he fumbled for the damp, stained sash about the man's belt. Freeing it, he bound Espalda's hands tightly behind his back with knots pulled hard into the wet cloth. He found two more knives in the belt under the sash and tossed them off into the darkness. With his own belt he lashed Espalda's ankles and rammed a handkerchief tightly into his mouth.

This last was a precaution he took automatically. The feeling still persisted in him that the border man had not come alone. He made a swift circle of the house, and found the yard empty. Then he tried the barn. Two rain-slick horses were ground-reined, just inside the door. They shied nervously away from him. He tried to sooth them, low-voiced, then abandoned the attempt when he realized it was the blood running from the fingers of his left hand which was spooking them. Both animals were under scarred stock saddles.

There were saddlebags on one. He searched them, found some carelessly folded squares of paper. Garland withdrew these, stacked them, and shoved them into his shirt pocket.

Moving from the darkness of the barn to the darkness of the night, he doubled rapidly back up to the house. He checked Espalda, found the man now twisting helplessly against his bonds.

Tess Milburn opened the kitchen door swiftly in response to his single sharp rap. He stepped in, pushed the door closed with his shoulders, and slid the bar across it back in place.

"Was—was there anyone?" the girl asked.

"Espalda. He'll keep till morning, now."

"Then we can have light?"

"After we've strung blankets across the windows. There are two horses in the barn. Espalda didn't ride both of them."

"One could have been for—for me—" the girl said.

Garland had forgotten why the border man had come here. If Espalda had come alone—

TESS brought blankets. Garland helped her stretch them over the curtain hangers at the tops of the windows. In a moment her steps moved briskly across the room, paused, and approached him.

"A match, Gar?"

He fumbled in his shirt pocket. The papers he had thrust into it impeded him. This was something at which he wanted to look, shortly. He found the match and handed it to Tess.

"Light will be all right, now," he said. "There's something you can do for me—and you'll need a little light."

The match flashed beside the base of the lamp and in a moment the wick caught. Yellow light drove back the shadows. Tess turned slowly toward him, relief in

her eyes. It fled when she saw the bloody sleeve and hand.

"You're hurt!" she cried.

"Touched," he admitted. "Not much if you can get it tied for me."

Swiftly, efficiently, without further outcry or needless talk, the girl found scissors and clean linen and set to work. The open acceptance of injury by the girl meant something to Garland, gave him an understanding of her nature. There was practicality in her—the broad practicality which life on the range demanded of a woman. An automatic control of emotion which did not mean emotion was lacking. He could see it in her eyes as she worked. He thought that in this moment she was thinking, as he was, of the moment seemingly hours ago, when he had kissed her, speculating what might come after that kiss. Wondering if this was the beginning of something which would not pass in a single night. . . . He turned his eyes away from her face.

Before Yuma he had known such speculation. After the doors had opened to admit him to the dun old prison on the sandy banks of the Colorado, there had been no room in his mind for this kind of thinking, and there was none now. After he had seen the man who'd sent him behind rock walls, perhaps. But Ramsay was strong and well protected. It was not likely there would be anything, afterward.

WHEN Tess had finished bandaging his arm, Garland moved again to the door. He stood against it for a moment, listening to the drum of rain outside. The girl moved up beside him. Her eyes touched the door.

"Again, Gar?" she asked. He nodded.

"I can't down the hunch that Espalda didn't come alone. Maybe there are more horses than the pair I found in the barn. I have to know."

The girl considered this. "Yes," she

agreed. "And when you know, Gar, what then? Tonight is only a beginning of what Ramsay will try to do, now that dad's off the place. You're not thinking of staying?"

"No," Garland said. "I can't. I should be in the saddle, now. But I can stay long enough to see you clear. We'll have to turn Espalda loose in the morning. We can't keep him. And he'll head south as fast as he can ride to Ramsay's headquarters. You'll have to get down to Tucson, yourself. It isn't safe for you to stay here."

"It isn't safe for you to go outside again. It wasn't the first time. But you went. And I'm staying on the Cross X. I can't quit. You should understand that."

"I suppose I do," Garland admitted slowly. "I can't take you to Tucson. I can keep your doors barred until morning, perhaps, and then see you in your saddle before I hit my own trail. But that's all. That's all I'll try to do."

"Your business with Bob Ramsay is—important?" the girl asked quietly. "You're sure, Gar—very sure?"

Garland tore his eyes from her face again with an effort. He nodded. "It's important," he stated flatly.

Tess Milburn started to say something else. She broke off as a heavy hammering on the front door shook the house.

"Open up!" a voice shouted. "Open up, for the law. Want me to drown out here?"

THE voice was harsh, demanding. Garland glanced at the girl, freed his gun, and moved quietly through the house to the sitting room door. With his gun ready, he slid the bar back and tripped the latch. A big man, grayed, with a drooping mustache from which rain drip was running, and a swelling paunch, into which his belt bit deeply. He lifted his hat and swung it toward the floor, careless of the

rain he spilled from it onto the carpet. His eyes darted shrewdly from Tess Milburn to Garland and back to the girl, only to shift a moment later to Garland again and remain there. Without breaking the intensity of his scrutiny, he shrugged his shoulders out of a worn, cracked yellow oilskin.

"A hell of a night—" he offered tentatively. "I'd have stayed home if I'd have known the devil was pushing this corner of his wet hell into Arizona."

"Who are you, Mister?" Garland demanded, in a thin and edgy voice. The man's brows shot up as though in surprise.

"Weren't you expecting me?" he asked. "Somebody's been writing me letters from down here. I'm Billam, the sheriff."

CHAPTER FOUR

Renegade Lawman

GARLAND did not like the man from the county office at Rimrock. It was not the instinctive dislike of the men from inside stone walls toward those who wore badges. It was more personal, fashioned from private reaction to the kind Billam appeared to be. Garland listened sourly to the thin commiseration the sheriff offered Tess Milburn over the wounds which had sent her father to Tucson. He listened to the officer's scant, grudging apology for the long delay in answering the Milburns' plea for aid.

Presently, when Billam had heard of the intrusion in the yard outside and Garland's part in checking it, he asked a few direct questions. Then Billam kicked out a chair and sprawled in it. That easy, insolent assumption of hospitality grated on Garland's nerves.

"Espalda, eh?" the man with the star said. "A bad hombre—not the worst of course—"

"No?" Garland said bluntly. "Who'd be your nomination—Ramsey?"

"Maybe," Billam said, his cold glance touching Garland. "But I'm glad to come up with Espalda. Leave him lay out there in the wet for a while. It'll wash out his starch. I'll go out directly when I've got the rain dried out of my hide and look to him. Meantime, should you have a little whiskey, some would be mighty welcome."

Tess rose and went into the kitchen. Billam sat up and measured Garland with cold, speculative eyes.

"Thought the old man and this girl were alone here," he growled. "Where do you fit into the picture?"

"I'm new," Garland said remotely.

"Oh! Just hired? You won't get rich working for this outfit!"

"Didn't intend to," Garland told the man, holding his dislike down with an iron hand. "And, now you're here, there's nothing tying me to the place."

Billam's eyes glinted with satisfaction. The girl came back into the room with a dusty bottle, half full. She offered that and a glass to the sheriff. Garland caught her attention.

"You don't need me any longer, and I need sleep. It was you Espalda was after. Guess he came alone, after all. With the sheriff here, you'll be all right. He'll stay in the house the rest of the night."

The sheriff looked up from the drink he was pouring, glanced obliquely at the girl, and nodded slyly. "I'll do that," he said.

Tess spoke from across the room:

"Thank you, Gar—for—for everything—"

Garland offered her his hand. "I'll be gone with daybreak, Tess," he said. "Good-bye—and good luck—"

"Good luck to you, Gar," Tess told him earnestly. "You'll need it more than I will."

GARLAND looked for a hidden meaning in that simple statement, could find none, and nodded curtly to the sheriff before pulling open the door. Crossing the yard to the bunkhouse, he expected to feel relief. He was now done with an obligation incurred because a girl had shoved a gun into his back at a broken-down fence. With a night's sleep under his belt, he had only a short ride ahead to the destination he had anticipated so long. By another sunset the bitterness festering in him would have been burned out, cauterized in a brief, flaming violence which would engulf Bob Ramsay. That it might also engulf him was beyond his caring. He had faced this possibility too often in Yuma's bleakness to consider it now. Nothing mattered beyond Ramsay's death.

However, relief would not come. His dislike for Sheriff Billam clung to his consciousness. His recognition of the impossible row Tess Milburn and her father were trying to plow had remained in his mind. Speculation as to what the future held for this girl with her wide, honest eyes and her man's kind of womanliness plagued him, for the feeling persisted that she was his kind of woman. But a man one night from death could think of nothing but the time left him and the thing he had sworn to do.

Sitting on the edge of his makeshift bed in the empty bunkhouse, Garland built a cigarette in the darkness and reached for a match. His fingers again encountered the folded squares of paper he had found in a sadlebag on one of the strange horses in the barn. He tossed these on a table, touched the candle alight, and fired his cigarette. Breaking the dying match, he reached for one of the pieces of paper and snapped it open. It contained a block of printing under a scarehead caption. He read swiftly, then breathed a startled oath. Catching up the crumpled papers, he blew out the candle and looked through

a window. Light was bright in the kitchen of the Milburn house. The blankets Garland and Tess had hung over the windows had been taken down. Garland grinned wryly. There was no fear in the sheriff of possible prowlers from Bob Ramsay's crew.

Ducking again into the night, he ran swiftly and silently toward the place where he had left Espalda lying bound in the rain. He knew beforehand what would be there—the slit rags of Espalda's knotted sash and a piece of his own belt. Espalda would be gone.

Garland felt a grudging respect for the big man now in the kitchen with Tess Milburn. He had worked smart and fast. While Garland and the girl were talking in the house—while Tess was binding up the wound Espalda had slashed into Garland's arm, the big man had cat-footed to Espalda and had freed him. Only when Espalda was on his way southward to Ramsay's headquarters with news of this occurrence, had the self-styled sheriff knocked boldly on the front door. Boldly, because he must face a nervous girl and a baleful man, and run a bluff that mustn't fail.

MOVING to the kitchen door, still gripping the rumpled papers, Garland listened a moment. He could hear the girl's voice—and the man's. He rapped once, solidly, on the kitchen door. The man's sharp exclamation was audible. So were the girl's footfalls as she crossed the room. The bar slid back and Garland slammed quickly into the room, gun out. He swung its muzzle toward the big man at the kitchen table.

"Don't get jumpy—Fritch!" he cautioned. The other played his hand high and blandly.

"You loco, man?" he growled.

"Not quite enough to take your bait," Garland said.

Tess, startled, shoved forward angrily.

"Gar, what is this? Put that gun up!"

"After I've pulled this overgrown lobo's teeth," Garland growled. "He isn't the sheriff, Tess. His name isn't Billam. He's Ed Fritch, wanted up north and probably now drawing his pay from Bob Ramsay."

"Boy," the man said unpleasantly, "I'm going to hide you in my jailhouse so long your grand-children will forget you!"

"The hell!" Garland said. He tossed the rumpled papers in his hand down on the table in front of Tess Milburn. "I told you two horses came in here tonight," he reminded the girl. "I found these in a saddle bag on one of them. Fritch's vanity made him keep these—probably torn off of cross-road trees as he rode past, with a posse dusting up his back-trail. Wanted dodgers from two other counties beside this one—"

He swung back to the man.

"You're pegged too tight to wiggle, Fritch! The description fits you like your skin—even to the double mole on your left cheek."

Tess stared in disbelief, reading laboriously through the printing on the dodgers. The man behind the table shifted his weight carefully, then sagged back at an admonishing wave of Garland's gun. Tess turned to Garland.

"I don't understand, Gar. What does it mean?"

"Ramsay, coppering his bets, as usual," Garland said bitterly. "Making sure. He sent Fritch to cover Espalda. When I came back in from outside, he cut Espalda loose and sent him hammering south, then pinned on his tin star and moved in to keep you rooted until Ramsay decided what to do next. Something like that. Maybe he has sent word for Ramsay to come himself." Garland smiled thinly. "I hope so!"

"Nobody is crazy enough to carry something as incriminating as these with him

when he's on this kind of—of work!" the girl protested.

"Everybody is crazy who tries to ride the kind of a trail Fritch and his breed follow," Garland said. "It takes a sane man to know which side of the law is the right one. There are plenty of night riders who've made a hobby of collecting posters on themselves. It swells their chests. Fritch seems to be one of them."

THE big man had been eyeing Garland intently. He scowled, now. "You know a lot about back trails yourself, boy," he growled. "And you've got a familiar look. I ought to know you. Let me work on it. I'll place you, hombre!"

"Don't strain yourself," Garland advised shortly. He turned to the girl. "I'll need some rope."

Tess nodded and stepped into her bedroom. She came back with some light line, possibly kept for hanging clothes inside in weather like this. Stepping into the corner, she lifted the shotgun and, unbidden, covered the man at the table with it. Garland moved in, forced Fritch's hands behind him, and bound them tightly. Lifting his gun again, he gestured the man toward the door.

"I'll stake him out in the bunkhouse," he told Tess. "You're going to have more company before sunup—long before. I want you to have room in here to handle that scattergun, and Fritch will crowd you."

Tight-lipped, the girl nodded. Garland pushed his prisoner out into the rain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brand of Cain

IN THE bunkhouse, Garland lighted the candle again and unceremoniously stretched Fritch out on the bed he had planned to occupy, tying wrists and feet securely to head and foot boards. Fritch

watched him sullenly. Suddenly he swore.

"Gar! Short for Garland, by hell! I told you I'd place you. Ramsay won't like finding you here, Mister. He won't be expecting it. He told me the other day we'd have to start thinking about you—that you'd be out in another six months. He won't be expecting this at all!"

"I got out on good behavior," Garland said grimly. "Bob wouldn't think about that. He wouldn't know how to earn it, himself."

"How'd the Milburn girl get hold of you, Garland?" the man on the bunk asked. "How the hell did you edge into this tangle?"

"Accident," Garland said. "I'm getting out of it in the morning."

Fritch chuckled thinly. "The hell you say!" he mocked. "This is Bob's big play. He's getting it all set. And you've tied knots in it. You know what Bob's like when someone fouls the noose he's making."

Garland nodded. "I know all about Bob Ramsay. I've had time to remember everything I might have forgotten. I know him a damned sight better than you do, Fritch—well enough to know he has you and Espalda on a short line and a sharp hook."

"Talk!" Fritch jeered.

Garland shrugged. "All right, figure it. You say this is the big play. That means Bob has got his net stretched. He's cleaned out the Milburn place, so it's ready for a drive across it. He's got the cattle he wants all marked, up on the two syndicate spreads to the north. A quick strike, a short drive across the Cross X, and he's in Mexico with enough beef to set him up on an *estancia* he's already got picked out. Only the girl's in his way—and me—and you and Espalda."

The man on the bunk twisted a little.

"I'll admit the drive he's making up, and the *estancia*, and the fact you and that

girl are in the way—but you’ve muffed it on Espalda and me.”

Garland grinned crookedly.

“And you think you know Bob Ramsay!” he scoffed. “You think he wants to share what he’s got lined up south of the border with you two? You think he actually gives a damn about what happens to Tess Milburn, so long as she’s moved out of the way? Or to you? I’ll tell you something Fritch. I came in here just ahead of you two. I was met with a scattergun shoved into my back. Miss Milburn was waiting. Ramsay had sent a *cholo* ahead to warn her Espalda was coming. Didn’t mention you, but—ever see what a smoothbore crammed with buckshot does from close up? My bet is that she’d have blasted both of you down. You’re tagged and ready for a snug six-by-three fit!”

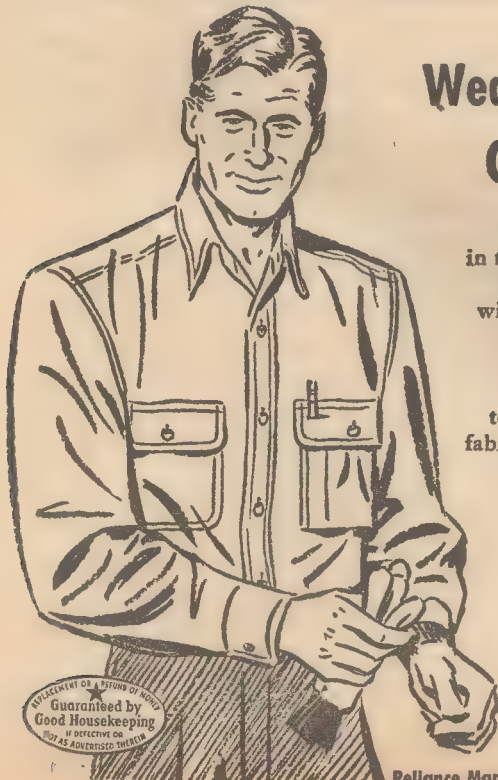
“We’ve stuck by Bob through a long, dry spell of little bites at those syndicate

herds, and small returns, waiting for that stubborn girl and her old man to break. Bob wouldn’t pull anything like that now!”

Fritch’s confidence was unshaken. Garland shrugged again. He had tried to give the man what he knew, from his experience with Bob Ramsay, must be truth. The hell with him if he didn’t want it.

“Bob Ramsay would pull anything, any time, against anybody,” he said, voice bitter, “if it would put a nickle in his pocket or give him the satisfaction of coming out on top of a deal. It’s going to cost you a hell of a lot to find that out—your life, before very long, now. But it’s your life.”

“You wouldn’t be trying to throw this big scare just to edge Espalda and me out with Bob, would you, Garland?” Fritch inquired, with a twisted grin. “You wouldn’t be figuring on moving into our share of Bob’s *estancia* across the border? Bob told me that when you came back,



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you'd be kitten again, as in the past, purring and scraping for your little share of the milk bowl. He said you'd always be kitten—like you were the day you let him talk you into drawing a posse away from him on a horse he knew was lamed."

GARLAND bent and whipped the man's kerchief from his pocket. He rolled this into a ball between his hands. He shook his head, slowly.

"Some kittens grow," he said quietly. "Grow to be big cats, inside. Think of it, Fritch. Big cats!"

With a rough movement, he forced the man's jaws apart and rammed the wadded handkerchief far into his mouth.

The man on the bunk struggled, then quieted. His eyes remained balefully on Garland, who understood their message. There was one man and one girl on the Milburn ranch. A girl already pushed almost beyond endurance, and a man who had always buckled to the bullying of a bigger man. In a little while the bigger man would be on the Cross X, with Espalda and perhaps others. There was enough patience in Fritch to wait.

Garland blew out the candle and stepped again into the night. The rain had slowed and stopped. Scud was running, overhead, moving away from the promise of dawn in the east. There were a few stars, faint and cold. There was no light in the Milburn house. It was a long moment before Garland realized Tess Milburn had again hung the blankets over the kitchen windows and closed off the rest of the house. He moved around the corral, found a pole in place, and sat on it. Slowly, carefully, he built a cigarette and touched it alight. He didn't want to go back in the house.

Presently he flipped the cigarette away, but half smoked. He was being dishonest with himself. He did want to go back into the house. He wanted to get Tess Mil-

burn out of it and up into saddle. He wanted to work fast and silently into the hills and meet the sun a long way from the Cross X. He wanted a new beginning, without fear or hatred or bitterness. He wanted the girl. He swore softly.

This was what he wanted. But he knew Tess Milburn would not leave her ranch. And he knew, also, with terrible clarity, that when Bob Ramsay rode into this yard, he would be exactly what Ed Fritch had said he would, a kitten, cringing. His brave words to Fritch were bitter dust on his lips, now. Yuma had been a long way from Bob Ramsay. And on the long, eastward ride into these hills, Ramsay had been distant, too—always at the far end of the string. Now the string was played out and recollection of Bob Ramsay's hardness, his complete selfishness, and the heavy weight of his hand, ground heavily through Garland's mind.

They had been kids together, and they had grown together. What happened in early years were things no man could ever completely escape. The Milburn ranch was across half the state from the dusty plain where Garland had pulled a posse from Bob Ramsay's neck and then failed to escape pursuit himself because his horse buckled. But the compulsions which had made him take that sacrificing ride more than five years before were still present, deeply ingrained. Five years of Yuma had not robbed them of strength.

Restless, uneasy, fighting a grim battle within himself, Garland made a quick, silent circuit of the Milburn place. He found nothing. He tried another smoke, found it bitter, and started around the perimeter of the ranch yard again. When he was moving along the brush encroaching on the side opposite to the gate, he heard the sound for which he had been waiting. Horses coming in at a full lope, keeping to sod for silence, but taking no other precautions.

HE SAW the riders, silhouetted for a moment against a gaunt hillside. Only two. His lips tightened.

Ramsay liked help, a taking of the risk by others when the odds weren't heavily in his favor. But he didn't share worth a damn when there was profit in sight. He could have squared the manslaughter charge the posse trailing Garland five years ago had brought with it. The dead man had at least made a gesture of violence before he died, and the principle of self-defense was strong in border law, and tolerance could have been had from the court. But if he had faced up to that, Bob Ramsay would have been forced to share the freight business he had built up there by violence and intimidation with the man who had tagged in his shadow, never quite knowing the truth until it was too late. Buying a couple of false witnesses and filing an affidavit accusing his half-brother of his own act was cheaper and easier. And then the proceeds from the business had been all his, to squander in the life he liked, before turning to crooked trails.

It was not Bob Ramsay's fault that the courts of Arizona had not ordered Garland Ramsay hanged by the neck until head. One of the hired witnesses had stupidly discredited himself, revealing more of the circumstances of the dead man's death than he should, so that while the court had a mistaken belief in the killer's identity, the manner of death was too plain to justify hanging. Ten years, commuted to six—less good behavior time.

But after the staggering total of those endless days, Garland Ramsay could not now kill the man who shared his name.

The two riders from the south swung down on the far side of the corral. Ramsay was efficient in something like this. He always had been. Supposing that Fritch, still posing as Sheriff Billam, would be in the house, watching the girl,

and that the drifter who had fouled this affair up would be asleep in the bunkhouse—the situation which had existed when Espalda skinned out for help—Ramsay had apparently already given his companion his orders.

Moving like a silent shadow, Espalda scuttled for the bunkhouse. Ramsay, unhurried, headed toward the Milburn house. Garland angled to cut him off, thinking he could at least warn the girl, but he pulled himself up sharply. He doubted that Tess would be in any immediate danger, and he was thinking of Fritch, lying bound and gagged on the bed in the bunkhouse, unable to identify himself in the darkness.

Espalda would remember his own treatment at Garland's hands. He would strike swiftly and surely. Garland could not stomach the irony of the border man's knife going home in the body of his helpless companion. Veering, he ran with long, reaching strides around the sagging corral, trying to intercept Espalda before he reached the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER SIX

The Answer Is Death

FOR fifty yards, Garland thought he could make it. Then a stray pole from the corral, lying in the weeds of the neglected yard, tripped him. He went down heavily, skidded, and came up still running. But the delay had been sufficient. Espalda slid through the bunkhouse door scant yards ahead of him. Garland drove into the opening without breaking stride. The border man had located the bunk, was beside it, his knife high, his powerful body tense. The sound of Garland's entry jerked him partially around.

"*Quien es? Jefe?*" he breathed sharply.

Garland piled into him. The two of them went over the bunk, struck the floor on the other side, and Espalda's rounded

jaw was in silhouette for a moment. Without freedom for a swing, Garland jabbed the muzzle of the gun in his hand upward. It made a sharp, solid sound against the border man's chin. The fight ran out of Espalda. Garland rolled him free, kicked the knife from his half-open hand, and bent over Fritch with the blade in his own grip.

False dawn was beginning to light the interior of the room. Fritch's face was a patch of highlight and shadow, undistinguishable. But the beaded sweat across his forehead was bright. He had seen Espalda's knife poised for the kill.

"Get out," Garland said. "Get Espalda roused and hit the hills—both of you. My score has been with Bob. My business from here on in is only with him."

He stroked with the knife, cutting the cordage fastening Fritch's wrists to the headboard. Dropping the blade beside the man, he ran to the door and drove hurriedly across the yard toward the house. He didn't want to face the man now inside with Tess Milburn—the big steel-jawed man who had been the only one he had ever feared. But a man learns discipline behind stone walls. He learns how far a man can be driven and how to drive himself. Garland's pace did not slacken as he hit the slatted panel of the kitchen door with his shoulder, smashing it open, and lunged into the room.

The door struck an obstacle on its inward swing. Tess Milburn cried out sharply. The heavy concussion of a shotgun jolted the room, and a great chunk of plaster fell from the far wall. Garland slid to a halt, staring into the unwavering muzzle of the heavy gun which appeared in the hand of a man sitting directly at the table. A man a little older than Garland, with the veined face of a high-handed living, but with a great, thick, powerful body from which the gift of lightning speed of movement had not departed.

Garland's head twisted around. Behind the door, Tess Melburn was coming to her feet. The shotgun lay on the floor where it had fallen. He understood.

Tess had been clever. More clever than he. Somehow she had managed to get Bob Ramsay under the muzzle of her scatter-gun when he entered the house. The man had been helpless. And Tess had been waiting for Garland. Bursting in the door, he had struck her, knocking the gun from her hands, discharging it harmlessly. And Bob, sitting tensely at the table, had lifted his own weapon.

"As clumsy as ever, Gar, eh?" the man at the table chuckled. "You owe the little lady an apology, I think. She skinned her elbow."

GARLAND hung on the balls of his feet, rocking back and forth a little, old tortures coming back. There was no mistaking that flat, sardonic amusement in Bob's eyes. He had not expected this. His half-brother had come out of Yuma months before he had expected, but it made little difference now. This was a clean-up, anyway. And much better than waiting five months more to clean up his last bit of unfinished business.

"So you tracked me down in a hurry, Gar?" he said. "What did you expect to find—open arms? Or was it a share of whatever I was working on when you found me that you wanted? I've never needed a snivelling half-brother very much. I don't need one now at all. You understand, Gar?"

Garland nodded. He spoke over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Tess—"

The girl moved into his range of vision, her face blanched, her eyes locked on his rocking figure.

"Gar—careful! He's going to kill you!"

Bob Ramsay shook his head curtly.

"Not quite yet. There are more than

the three of us on the Cross X tonight. The others have to be taken care of before I send word to my drovers north of us to start their drive; before you and I start out for the border, girl. Take it easy, Gar! You've always been a good boy. Be good now or I'll give you a hole in your bell to grab."

Bob Ramsay rose, crossed unhurriedly, and scornfully unsnapped Garland's gun-belt. It fell to the floor and he kicked it into a corner. He grinned and moved to the door.

"It's too much to hope that you have already polished off Espalda and my friend with the tin star," he said. "You always did lack the guts to take a scalp when the hair was in your hand, Gar. So we'll all go and take care of that, now. Espalda, first. Then Fritch. Then you, Gar—last. Miss Milburn won't be much trouble after that. Nothing like a little blood to take the stays out of a woman's corset."

His hand touched the latch. There was a rustle of movement. Garland saw a ridiculously short but very ugly large caliber gun in Tess Milburn's hand as it came away from the folds of her robe.

"Drop your gun!" she ordered Ramsay in a strained voice. "Drop it! I've been saving this for you. Gar—move!"

Gar leaped forward, then, but he was too slow. After a first instant of slackened surprise, Bob Ramsay struck in a blur of action. A single stride brought him in reach of the girl. His left crossed in a flashing arc and his open palm slapped her cheek sharply. At the same time, he struck out with the muzzle of his own weapon, hitting the girl's gun and knocking it downward from her fingers just as it fired. The slug tore splinters from the floor beside his boot. Shaken and startled, Tess staggered back. Bob Ramsay caught her arm, twisted it, and sent her reeling across the room.

If he hadn't done that—if he had

stopped short of just that one last—

GARLAND was not aware his own body was in motion until his shoulder struck his half-brother. There was no conscious direction of his muscles, but his hand clamped over the hammer of Bob's gun, making the weapon useless, and with a quick reversal of his body weight, he tore the weapon from the man's hand and tossed it into the corner where his own gun lay. For an instant he faced this man he had hated and feared so long—for an instant he realized that here, after all, was the end of the trail he had followed in his mind during the long months he had been within the walls at Yuma.

"Bob," he said, "I've been waiting for this moment a long time. But I think the good God must have waited even longer—"

He hit his half-brother—a high, glancing, clipping blow across the crown of the cheek. It brought blood. He had meant it to be a full swing, centered in the middle of the man's face, but in the making of it a tenseness ran into him, spoiling his timing. The hot, eager fierceness in Bob's eyes caused that, perhaps. The hunger for dominance. Perhaps the knowledge that Bob could break him as he had once, in Garland's presence, broken a thin, ridge-running kid who had been too full of whiskey and couldn't keep his mouth shut.

Bob's first blow was an explosive forward jab of his massive right hand at belt level which built a churning fire in Garland's belly and bent him double, retching. As he bent, the man's knee smashed savagely into his face. Momentarily blinded, Garland reeled against the wall. Bob pinned him there with a crushing drive of his shoulder, released him, and as he fell away from the wall, hit him with a full, whistling swing which landed under his ear and sent him crashing into

the front of the stove. He lay across the cool iron of the stove top for an instant, waiting for agony to come—waiting for the inevitable price a man paid for standing up to Bob Ramsay. But, surprisingly, there was no agony. A little pain. A dullness, a tormenting slowness of movement, but his head remained clear—and he could still move. He straightened, forcing his slack body upright, and stumbled forward. Bob's face was before him. He fainted clumsily and struck at it. His knuckles bit flesh again.

Then explosiveness was against him—weight and power. He was carried back. His head struck the wall. A fist smashed his ribs with pile-driving force, exhausting his wind in an involuntary, ugly grunt. And his knees buckled. He sagged backward to the floor, instantly drew his knees under him and began to come upright again. Tess Milburn's arm was about his neck for an instant, clutching tightly, her breast protectively against his face.

"Gar—no! No!"

He pushed her roughly aside, swayed to his feet. Bob was backing away, grinning savagely, rubbing skinned knuckles against the bloody smear of his mouth.

"Come on, Bob!" Garland husked. "This is one time you can't beat me. I'll never crawl—never be your kitten again! You may be able to kill me. You'd better, because I'm going to kill you if you don't. Come on, Bob—"

The kitchen door slatted open. Ed Fritch and Espalda came in. Fritch looked at Garland without friendliness, then turned to the big man.

"Bob, there's no time for this, now. We've been talking, Espalda and me. We want straight answers to some straight questions—about a *cholo* who came to see this girl today, for instance—"

"This fight is just starting!" Garland snarled. "And it's going on!"

"Stand still, Bob!" Ed Fritch said.

"We're going to have those answers—and proof as well—"

BOB RAMSAY was backing away fast, still with that savage smile on his face. He ended up in the corner where his weapon and Garland's lay, bent with a swift movement and scooped up his gun.

"No answers, Ed," he whispered. "And no questions! Too many tangles in this thing. I'm cutting through them—all of them, here and now—"

Tess tried to get in front of Garland. He pushed her aside.

But Bob was smiling thinly at Fritch, and the muzzle of the gun was on him as he eared the hammer back. Fritch's face blanched.

"Bob, wait!"

Bob Ramsay's gun fired. Two staccato jolts of sound, with a quick shift of the weapon between them. Fritch put his hand across the flatness of his shirt above the buckle of his belt, gripped crimson cloth convulsively, and turned slowly to the wall. He leaned there a moment, then slid slackly to the floor. Espalda, the border man, the thick-shouldered cat Garland had met twice in the darkness, was knocked down in the doorway by the bullet that struck him. He lay with head and shoulders against one jam, his dulling eyes savagely fixed on Bob Ramsay. The big man turned arrogantly, deliberately away from him, swinging toward Garland.

The gun came up again, the hammer earing back. But it did not fire. For a long moment Bob Ramsay stood motionless, holding the weapon steadily in front of him, then he lowered it slowly, as though it had suddenly become very heavy, and turned. From the doorway, a harsh, bubbling voice spoke:

"*Que lastima, cabron—que lastima—!*"

Out of the corner of his eye Garland saw that Espalda had forced his body into a more erect position against the door

jamb. There was blood at his mouth and he was breathing shallowly, as though from great exertion. The border man's lips parted in savage scorn and he tried to speak again. Suddenly he spilled forward like an empty sack.

Bob Ramsay had gripped the edge of the table. He stared at Garland, and his lips moved, but no sound came. All arrogance was out of him now, and in his face was a look that told Garland the big man was feeling at this moment some of the deep loneliness and fright that he had so often felt himself. Without warning, the table overturned under the uneven pressure of his weight upon it, and the big man rolled limply onto the floor. Not until then did Garland see the slender, carefully weighted haft of a border throwing knife protruding from the broad expanse of his back.

Garland's eyes touched the fallen men.

Death crowded this room, he thought. Nothing but cold, oppressive death.

He must have voiced that thought, for Tess Milburn reached him, gripped him tightly.

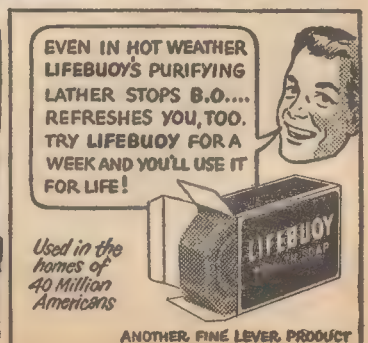
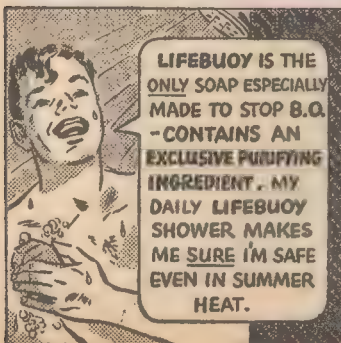
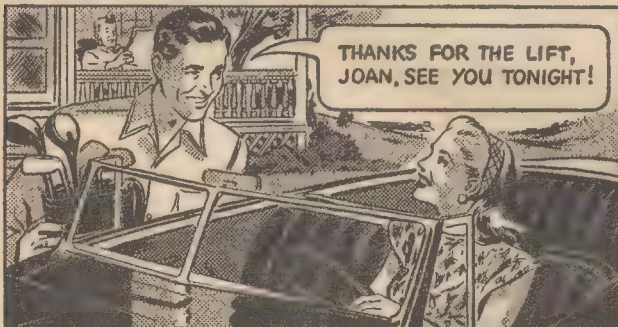
"No, Gar," she whispered. "Life! For you, and—and for me. And we've time now. All we want. All the rest of our lives!"

Garland clutched at her for support. The hurt was beginning to come now. But that would pass. The time Tess had mentioned would heal him. And Garland had time. He would never reach the end of the trail, now, that he had followed from Yuma. But he had lost his old fears when he had stood up against Ramsey. And that thought brought exultation, surging hope.

He touched the girl's face with his hand, gently. "Sure," he said. "Sure, Tess."

THE END

TOM CLICKS ON VACATIONS-NOW!



Here's Lead in Your Back

By
Ray
Townsend



"Turn that horse back, Frazier. I won't say it again!"

The fabulous Crown-Star's golden wealth was hers, and Frazier aimed to see that Janet Calvert kept it. Even if he had to kill the ruthless man she loved, and then take her thanks in snarling, red-hot lead!

GEORGE FRAZIER found the girl in the deeper shadows near the end of the veranda. The light from the ballroom inside the Idaho House was dim here, and for a moment he thought she was alone. He spoke her name before he saw the man's gleaming shirt-front and the whiteness of his smile.

"Hello, Frazier."

It was Frank Ward, as George had known it would be, and the knowledge

deepened twin furrows between his brows. It was as if Ward's presence at this particular time was an omen, portending the end of a certain portion of his life, as did the message upon the colored scrap of paper he had thrust into a pocket minutes before.

The girl's white-gowned figure did not move from Ward's side and even as he spoke, Frazier remembered the days of the up-river voyage, the nights these two

had spent on deck, and he knew suddenly that there was more here than mere omen. He said, more harshly than he'd meant: "Your father's dead, Jane. I thought you should know."

He heard the quick intake of her breath and was not surprised when she turned to Ward instead of himself. He stood there in the dark, a solid, square man, not dressed for the festivities inside, feeling crude and awkward as he always did before the smooth faultlessness of Frank Ward. But there was stubbornness, too, in George Frazier. His jaw tightened and he stepped closer, as though physical nearness would impose his will upon this slender, petulant girl he had loved so long.

"Thane's dead!" he said again, almost challengingly. "You hear me?"

Jane Calvert's laugh came abruptly, an uneasy sound, and George realized she'd been drinking. "You said that before," she said unsteadily.

"For God's sake, Jane!" He forgot himself then, forgot Frank Ward, as he gripped the girl's arm, turning her so that her face was close to his own. "What kind of woman are you? It's Thane, your father! He's dead, you hear? Dead, not on a damned picnic!"

"You don't have to yell, Frazier. The lady can hear." There was the stir of others moving out from the ballroom beyond as Ward's quiet voice came.

"It's all right, Frank, let him yell, let him shout his head off for all the good it'll do him!" The girl straightened, wrenching free of Frazier's grasp abruptly. "So Thane's dead is he? Well, what am I supposed to do about it? You didn't expect him to live forever, did you? I can't bring him back to life, can I?"

Anger ran up against his feeling for the girl, and in that moment George Frazier could have horsewhipped the spoiled, wilful girl, without conscience. But she defied him, her voice coming in quick,

brittle stabs of sound that cut him.

"I'm glad he's dead, George Frazier! Now I can do what I like, when I like, without someone looking over my shoulder all the time! And you!" Her words sharpened sarcastically. "Why are you so excited? Afraid for your job now that Thane's gone?"

The girl paused, the sound of her breathing coming quickly. When she spoke again her voice was a whiplash of scorn.

"Well, you don't have to be afraid for your job any more. Mister Frazier! You're through! Understand? Through! It's my money now, and my firm and my estate, do you hear? I told you before we left San Francisco that I didn't need an escort on this trip. I'm old enough to know what I want and now I'm rich enough to buy it!"

"Old enough to make a damned fool of yourself, you mean!" George's anger burst out. "And if you think I'm going to let you make the rest of this trip alone, you're—"

"Alone!" Her laugh was contemptuous. "You're the fool! Frank, you tell him! I haven't the heart!"

"Why, yes, Frazier." Ward's soft voice came. "Jane and I had planned to go on together from Lewistown, here. We heard about her father's death several hours ago. We were going to tell you you could take the next boat down-river. We don't need you now."

"You're going nowhere except back to San Francisco with me, you hear?" George had the girl's arm again in his grasp, ignoring the shorter man's words, oblivious to the crowd which had gathered before the opened French doors of the large room beyond. Ward's voice came again then, softly, but somehow dangerous.

"I don't think you understand, Frazier. I just said that Jane was going on with me!"

FOR the first time since he had come onto the veranda Frazier looked directly at Frank Ward. The man had stepped around Jane Calvert and in the dim light George caught the gleam of metal in his ungloved hand. He remembered, then, how Frank Ward had kept his right hand gloved during the days of their passage up the Columbia and the Snake, to Lewiston, relegating most duties, as now with the small pistol, to the left.

The sight of the gun sparked against his temper and he batted the weapon from the man's hand so abruptly that Ward was spun half around before he could recover. Considering Ward's smaller build, it never occurred to George that the man would fight, and he was turning again to the girl when Frank stepped in and swung.

It was not a blow from a man's fist. It was as though he'd been kicked in the stomach with the iron-shod hoof of a mule. Light exploded before his eyes, and the tearing, sick agony of blind nausea gripped and held. He was hit again, high on the temple, and again it was the deadly hardness of metal rather than a man's fist. Light and darkness spun before his eyes and George felt himself go down. He tried to push up from the boards of the porch, but could make no focus of the spinning jumble before him.

Dimly he heard a man's voice, saw him hazily beyond Ward's hazy form. There was the glint of a gun in the man's hand and Frank Ward was backing away before him. Fear came up suddenly in George that Ward would get away and he reached out for him, but the picture was spinning again as he moved, and light and dark ran together and he was falling once more and couldn't stop.

Even before he completely awakened, once more seemed to see George Ward's gloved hand, negligently holding the extra glove he never wore. He knew it was a

false hand then, probably molded of metal, beneath the innocence of black glove. The memory of the hand's deadly effectiveness ran splinters of pain piercingly through his brain. Ward's arm, he judged, had been amputated well below the elbow, to allow the man so quick and accurate a use of it. It was something he should have noticed before.

Well, I'm damned if I thought I'd ever see the day George Frazier'd take a licking from a man half his size!"

As George opened his eyes he saw that he was lying upon a bed and recognized the big blond man grinning at him from the middle of the room as Hugh McNair, superintendent of the Calvert Crown-Star Mine in the Elk Creek diggings of the Bitter Root country. Pain stabbed again as George tried to rise, and the other man's voice turned more serious as he crossed to the bed, offering whiskey in a heavy chipped glass.

"Saw Ward kill a man with that fist in Portland last year," he said. "You've got to watch for it. If you don't know about it, you haven't got a chance."

"So I found out," George mumbled huskily as he swallowed the liquor. He looked up at the roughly handsome features of the other man, realizing suddenly that he'd not seen McNair since the man's last trip to San Francisco a year before. "I guess I owe you a turn," he said. "Ward won't like the idea of you holding a gun on him."

"A turn, the man says!" McNair's laughter was deep as he went across to pour himself a drink from the bottle on the table. "He slips me a handout and gets me the best job in the Idaho gold-fields, and now he owes me a turn! Hell, man, do you think I give a damn what Frank Ward likes or don't like?"

George smiled wryly, wincing again as he came upright on the edge of the bed. He steadied himself a moment before crossing to splash water into the china

bowl from a big-bellied pitcher. It was good to hear his friend's voice again, and for a moment he was thankful he'd gotten McNair the job at the Crown. He'd have a man he could trust to work with now that Thane Calvert was gone. And remembering Thane, and the details of his death, George's thoughts ran ahead, joining McNair's next words as though the two men were of but one mind.

"She'll be tough to handle, with the old man gone, George."

He didn't answer, feeling the freshness of cool water upon head and face. But George Frazier knew what the man meant, knew only too well that Thane Calvert had been a figurehead that had held the Calvert enterprise together. Filling Thane's shoes would be a big order for any man.

"This break with Ward won't help things much, either," McNair went on. "He's about the biggest man in these parts, George. Just about runs Elk City the way he wants."

George looked up from towelling himself. "You don't have to warn me, Hugh."

McNair frowned. "Well, I just thought you'd have enough on your hands anyway, without. . . ."

"You mean Jane," George straightened. "You don't think I'm going to leave her with him, do you?"

McNair waved a hand, his glance dropping. "From what I can see, she's over twenty-one and got a mind of her own."

"LISTEN, Hugh, there are some aspects of this thing you don't know—some that Jane herself doesn't know, from the look of it. And I guess that goes for Ward, too. Thane's dead. I guess everyone knows that by now. But I came straight from the telegraph office a while ago, where I received a long message from Evans, in the 'Frisco office.

"Thane's heart was bad, Hugh, and I

guess Jane naturally thought it had given out at last. He was a very active man and doctor's orders never did any good. His death was no surprise."

McNair snorted. "So I figured, from the display she put on downstairs," George ignored the sarcasm in the man's voice, but McNair continued, speaking bluntly, without meeting George's glance. "Look, boy, I heard some of what went on down there and I can guess some more. If this hot-headed female's inherited everything, why don't you just let it go? I know her kind, George. Hell, with all that Calvert money, she'll get along. Money like that breeds respect, even in the gold fields. She's got holdings all over hell's half-acre besides the Crown-Star and twenty jillion dollars worth of Comstock down in Nevada, so why don't you just mark it off the books?"

George studied the design in the worn carpeting at his feet and there was a bleakness to his glance that didn't match the square lines of his face.

"I've known Jane since she was a little girl, Hugh," he said quietly. "She's wilful, all right. But not like it seemed down there tonight." His mouth tightened. "You see, what Jane doesn't know is that Thane didn't die of heart trouble. The Calvert interests just lost a test case on the Right of Prior Claim on the Comstock. The value of all his north mine shares on the Lode collapsed. Thane Calvert shot his brains out two days ago in his office in San Francisco!"

McNair's eyes widened. "You mean to say the gal's broke?"

"Not quite," George said slowly. "There's the Crown-Star, of course."

"But hell, man, Calvert only took a six-months option on the Crown-Star!" McNair swore. "And that guy Allen, who owns the original claim, sold—" Hugh McNair's voice cut off abruptly, blood pounding up beneath tanned features, as

though he'd said something he shouldn't.

Frazier saw nothing, spoke as though to himself. "And there might be enough to take up the option on the Star. Outside of that. . . ." He shrugged, in finality.

McNair recovered quickly, demanding, "And that's all the gal's got left out of her old man's dinero?" For a moment the big man stared at George's face, and then, slowly and with huge appreciation, a grin spread itself about his wide mouth and a second later McNair's laughter was filling the room in bellowing rolls of sound. "Broke, by God! Broke!" he gasped between breaths. "Wait'll Ward hears this! Frank Ward, smartest operator in the goldfields! Hoodwinked by a skirt and a fluff of red hair!"

George was silent, watching the man laugh, and when he had sobered somewhat, said "it's not quite so funny from where I sit, Hugh. You see, in a note he left, Thane Calvert appointed me trustee and administrator of what was left of his estate." He laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "And you're wrong about the girl. You'll see."

McNair's brow wrinkled. "But hell, George, you can't buck—"

"Buck what, Hugh? The Crown-Star's proving up richer than we thought, isn't it? And we've got over a month to run on the option. With what there is of the estate and the bullion from the mine, we can meet the option price on time."

George's voice hardened suddenly. "Or can't we? After all, you've been in charge on this end, Hugh. I was meaning to see you about those monthly reports as soon as I got to Elk City. We'll work this thing out together."

The broad, blond man avoided George's glance. "To tell you the truth, things ain't been going any too well at the Star lately," he said slowly.

Apprehension came to George, and he remembered the doubt he'd felt when he received the last few development reports

at the office in San Francisco. There were little things, too, that he kept recalling of the life of Hugh McNair. None were much, alone, but just enough to keep the doubt from settling.

"All right, Hugh," he said quietly. "Let's have it."

The man hesitated, then he bit the words out as if they were hard to say.

"You'll have to count me out, George. I'm through. I can't do you no good with the Star."

"What is it, Hugh? We've known each other a lot of years. This is no time to—"

"It's because—" McNair was stammering suddenly. "The men— Hell, I don't know! It's just that I won't do you any good, that's all!"

George found his hat in a corner, pounded it into shape as he crossed to the door. He stood with his hand on the knob, looking across at the other man, making a sudden decision.

"Don't be damn fool, Hugh," he said briefly. "We'll leave for Elk City in the morning. If Miss Jane Calvert wants to see the goldfields, then, by God, she'll see the goldfields. And she'd better like what she sees, because her last dime's tied up in 'em!"

HE FELT the weariness of the horse beneath him as he reined up atop the low rise. The animal's breath fogged up in the crystal-sharp air, and he felt the cold even through the heaviness of his clothing. He removed his gloves to rub his hands together as he looked down at the town in the frozen white valley below.

"Ward's town, eh, Hugh?"

George Frazier glanced across at the big man as he rode up, seeing the brooding look in McNair's eyes, wondering again what it was eating him.

Since the *Colonel Wright* and the other two river steamers had pushed the head of the navigation as far up the Snake as Lewiston, the goldfield towns had really

begun to boom in earnest. But although the placers and drifts were being worked throughout the winter months, the roads from Lewiston to the foothills of the Bitter Roots were not yet open, and George and McNair had breasted drifts that would have stopped anything on wheels countless times in the three days they'd been on the trail.

Other parties had gone through by dog team and horse, and George had urged his mount through the deep snow at a pace that had finally brought mumblings of protest from McNair. "They'll be there when we hit Elk City," the usually jovial man had growled. But the urgency had not abated within George Frazier. It had, if anything, grown. . . .

Elk City's main street was a morass of hub-deep water and mud. In the cold of the morning the ridges and wheel tracks held sharply frozen, only to crumble and give way beneath the pressure of the day's traffic. Thaw was in the air and the streams were running white and free from the heights of the Bitter Roots beyond. As the two men moved into the town, George's glance searched the length of street carefully.

He saw her before he'd passed the first two stores. She'd just come out of Snider's Mercantile across the street, and as she paused at the walk's edge, Frank Ward appeared, stepping down to give her a hand into the high-wheeled buggy. She had seated herself in the buggy when she saw George. Her cheeks reddened as he rode up, and her glance ran quickly back to Ward, as though for reassurance.

"Well, well! If it isn't our San Francisco playboy!" Frank Ward smiled. "I was under the impression you'd fired the man, my dear. Or are you free-lancing now, Frazier? You'll find the going a little rougher here than in San Francisco, I'm afraid."

A man guffawed aloud and George saw suddenly that the four armed men hun-

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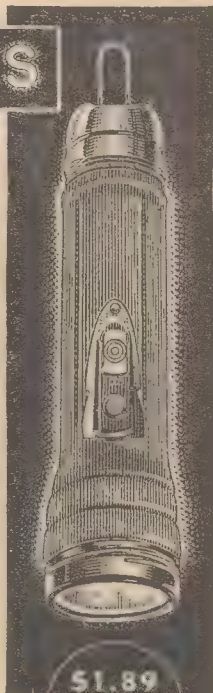
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kering along the walk's edge were backing Ward. They were all gaping gleefully, as though waiting for a show they knew would be fun. Fatigue and the gnawing worry of the past three days made their drag on George's thoughts, and he said, without humor: "I've got to talk to you, Jane. Now. Before either of us goes any further."

For a moment, for the space of one breath, he thought she'd relent; that the last three days of being with Ward, would make her listen to what he had to say. But Frank Ward's voice was there again, soft-spoken, but toned with the confidence of a man accustomed to being obeyed.

"You'd better go along to the house, Jane. I'll be there later when I'm through in town." He took a step and brought the flat of his hand down against the horse's rump. As Jane Calvert wielded the reins, turning the buggy into the center of the street, Ward's glance came sharply to Frazier's face. "If you try following the lady, one of the boys here might get plumb rambunctious, Frazier. In this country annoying a lady's a pretty serious offense."

In the moment that their eyes met, George knew that if he carried a pistol, he'd have used it then.

"We'll meet again one of these days, Ward," he said.

"Maybe the odds will be more even then!"

"The odds are never even in this country, Frazier," Ward returned. "You're playing my deck here and I deal them cold. You heard what Miss Calvert said down in Lewiston. That still goes, understand? Now get this straight: I'm running this field. Fifty percent of the paying claims on Elk Creek belong to me, and those that don't, will. When I tell a man to get out, he gets out—in the saddle or a pine box. I'm telling you now: get out, Frazier! Turn that horse back now and keep going! I won't say it again!"

THE man stood there, his right arm half bent, casually holding a glove. One dark eyebrow was puckered by a scar, so that he looked perpetually questioning, as if he didn't quite believe anything he saw or heard. The picture of a cocksure banty rooster came into George's mind suddenly, and he had an impulse to laugh in the man's face. But anger flooded up again and he felt the blood surge against his temples.

In that second he weighed the chances of his carbine against the men on the walk. McNair would side him. His glance shifted involuntarily then, and he saw what had escaped him before. The big blond man was gone. McNair and his horse had disappeared. For a moment he saw laughter in the glance Frank Ward gave him. His neck-reined the gelding then, easing around in the street, heading back the way he'd come. The horse's hoofs made slow sucking sounds in the mud as it plodded out of town. . . .

If George Frazier had any doubts left that Elk Creek was Frank Ward's country, they were all dispelled by the time he found the Crown-Star. "You're the feller who tried to buck Frank Ward down t'Lewiston, ain't you?" one oldtimer had demanded when George had asked the whereabouts of the Calvert mine. "They said you'd be along. I can't tell you nothing else, son, except that you'd best high-tail for home!"

He'd finally found the mine, by the name and a crude arrow painted on a weathered cedar sign in a small ravine several miles above the town. Further up, a fairly sizeable log cabin dominated the slope below the runway of the mine. He hadn't been surprised to find McNair's sorrel cayuse standing head down before the cabin, and the big man himself seated at the old roll-top desk in one corner of the room.

Hugh McNair looked up as George Frazier came into the room without knocking.

"Well, Hugh?" McNair said nothing, and George went on: "We've known each other a long time, Hugh," he said. "We've had our ups and downs, both of us. But—"

"You mean I was down—down in the gutter when you picked me up and got me a job bossing this mine, is that it?" McNair burst out savagely. He swung around, facing George, chin outthrust pugnaciously. "All right, damn it, if you don't like the way I run the Star, you can run the damned hole yourself! You got nothing else to do anyway, now that the old man's gone!"

But Frazier knew McNair was avoiding the issue. "Seeing's how we've always sided each other before, Hugh, I kind of counted on you this morning. What happened?"

The big man's eyes were haggard and some of the fight went out of his chin. "Damn it, I told you I wouldn't be any good to you, George!" he said.

"How long have you been in with Ward?" Frazier asked quietly.

"I'm not . . . oh, hell, ever since he bought the Star! About four months!"

"Bought the Star?" George echoed.

"Sure! He bought it from old Jig Allen, the old coot Calvert paid for the six-months option." The blond man turned pleading eyes on Frazier. "You can't buck Ward, George! After all, he does own the mine! There's no way around that, option or no option!"

"How much did he pay you, Hugh?" Frazier knew he was hitting the spots that hurt. "It must have been a lot to make you double-cross me."

"It wasn't you, George! It was the Calvert outfit! They had millions! You only worked for them, the same as me. And Ward owns the Star, damn it!"

There was a sound of hoofbeats along the road below the cabin. George's eyes did not leave McNair's face.

"That's probably him now, Hugh," he said. "I guess it won't make much dif-

ference to you one way or the other, but I'm playing the hand out right here. This mine belongs to Jane Calvert for another month, and after the option's taken up, it'll be hers for good. The Star was the only thing Thane left and, by God, I'm going to see that she gets it!"

McNair's glance narrowed upon George's face then. "You know," he said slowly, as though it had just occurred to him, "I wouldn't be surprised but what you did! And for a little redheaded tramp who'd spit in your face for your trouble!"

"Maybe." George met the man's gaze. "And maybe for a man who trusted me when he was alive, and the daughter he spoiled until she didn't know there was a right and a wrong. You can't go back on people because they're dead—or mixed up, Hugh."

THE hoofbeats slowed and stilled outside. The door opened slowly as both men turned to face it. "Damn!" McNair's curse came as the figure of Jane Calvert stepped through the door, the gun in his hand jerking downward abruptly as he broke the motion of his draw. He strode across the room then, pausing at the door as he spoke to the girl.

"You'll never come closer to eternity, ma'am," he said, "without staying. There's a man here I think you ought to listen to before he takes that trip himself. If you're what you are, you'll listen. If you don't, then he's made damned fools of both us. Me, I got work to do!"

She leaned against the door, bewilderment wrinkling the smoothness of her brow. She lowered her eyes from George's searching gaze. Her voice, when it came, was cool and controlled.

"I thought Frank would be here. I didn't think you'd have the nerve. . . ."

"Jane, listen to me!" George crossed to face the girl. "You know that I love you! You've known that for years! But there's something else you must know—

about Thane, and what I'm trying to do now!"

"Really, George!" Still the girl's pride held out. "Don't you think—"

"Shut up, damn it, and listen to me!" He had her shoulders then, and was shaking her when the shot sounded in the ravine below the mine. Another followed, and another, in quick succession. George dropped his hands from the girl, listening. Then, as he crossed to the door, a last shot exploded in the timber below.

"Come on! Get out of here!" Snatching up the carbine, he hustled her across the clearing and toward the shelter of a growth of quaking aspen. "That fool McNair's probably gone and got himself shot!"

Hoofbeats sounded up the trail as they stepped into the cover of aspen. As he stood there, peering out, the girl's faint perfume drugged his senses, and her nearness made his heart race.

There were three men in the party: Frank Ward and two of the gunmen George had seen in Elk City earlier that morning. As they reined up, George Frazier knew suddenly that these men intended to kill him. Hesitation dropped away. He drew head on the further and fired.

The .30—30 slug knocked the man half out of the saddle. His yell came as much in surprise as in pain as he pawed air for the horn. George spoke then, sending his voice out in an order that held Ward and the other man rigid on their mounts, made them raise their hands.

"You don't think you can get away with this, do you, tenderfoot?" Ward's challenge was contemptuous when it came, but nevertheless his hands lifted slowly skyward.

"Hell, you won't get ten feet from here before some of my men cut you down!"

George stepped out in the open. "It

won't be as easy as that, by the sounds of the firing down-canyon. How many men did it take you to gun down Hugh McNair, Ward?"

The man cursed. "I'm warning you to throw that gun down, Frazier!"

"You're through, Ward. You haven't got a man in miles."

"But a woman does just as well at times, George. Did you ever stop to think of that?"

THE girl's voice pulled George around without warning. She was standing there, before the aspens, the small-caliber pistol in her hand centered upon his chest. Surprise and actual shock paralyzed Frazier's body.

"Jane, you. . . ."

She laughed, the harsh, brittle laugh he had heard on the veranda in Lewiston. "You're as bad as Thane, George!" Ordering this, ordering that! There'll be no freedom as long as you're around! I told you to go back! Frank told you to go back, that night in Lewiston!"

"But, Jane, your father. . . ."

"Is dead, like you're going to be!" And as she finished his sentence with her own savage words, George saw fanaticism like a fever in the bright eagerness of her eyes. The years flashed before him then, and he saw again the pampering of a child grown more and more demanding until all that was left of her character was the insatiable need to have each whim and desire fulfilled. It came to him that Hugh McNair had been right about Jane Calvert, after all, and that it was too late for the plans that—suddenly there was a creak of saddle-leather, as mounted men wheeled. And at the same moment he heard a voice, from beyond the clearing—Hugh McNair's voice.

"Let's finish this dirty business right now!"

George threw himself to the ground,

(Continued on page 126)



THE MEN WHO DROVE THROUGH HELL!

By Raymond Colwell

They didn't need roads. Give 'em a bull-whip and six good horses, and they'd drive through hell and spit in Satan's eye.

THE DUST clouds slowly cleared above the splintered wreckage of the lean-to kitchen, smashed to kindling by the heavily loaded ore wagon which had thundered down from the steep hillside above. The hysterical screaming of the young mother quieted to racking sobs as she held her baby close and thanked God for their narrow escape. The excited voices of the gathering crowd were punctuated by revolver shots as the ore-hauler ended the thrashing agony of three of the big horses in his team.

"Rough-lock broke," he replied curtly to an inquiry.

Such an accident was the real, and almost the only, dread of the ore-hauler. A product of the primitive transportation system of the Old West, he was a distinct breed of mule-skinner, undaunted by steepest hill or hottest alkali flat. He had the same respect for an ordinary teamster as the old-time stage drivers had for their hostlers—which was none at all—and his most cutting retort was "Ah-h, go haul yer apples." Give him a "hitch" of four or six broad-chested, strong-quartered horses and he'd get his loaded ore wagon to the nearest mill or railroad, come hell or high water.

His cocky hat, usually a black, narrow-brimmed Stetson with the crown punched to a peak, was part of his unofficial uniform. The universal mark of the ore hauler was the "six-horse roll"—an eight or ten-inch cuff turned up at the bottom of his waist overalls, with its lower edge well above the ankle of his high laced boots. What was in between the hat and the overalls depended on the weather: In winter a short jacket or heavy coat with two or three shirts and sweaters, or a leather vest lined with sheepskin; in summer a short-waisted blue denim monkey-jacket over a flannel shirt.

A tightly buckled heavy leather belt from eight to twelve inches wide completed the effect. Some of them were of light-colored leather with ornamental stitching, some were plain leather, and some were bright with nickel studs and ornaments. The belt's purpose was not to hold up the overalls; it was to help the wearer's back and kidneys stand the terrific pounding and swaying of the high seat, six or eight feet above the ground, as the heavy outfit bounced from rock to rock.

Roads? There weren't any—aside from the main arteries where sufficient traffic

converged to make road construction imperative. If the route required travel on a side-hill, and the wagons just wouldn't stay right side up, two or three teams were hooked to a heavy road plow and a furrow was made across the rocky hillside. Then the upper wheels, guided by the furrow, quickly wore a rut deep enough to permit the wagon to stay upright—if the load wasn't piled too high.

No wheel team, no matter how powerful or well trained, could hold back six to twelve tons when the road pitched straight down the hill, even with the aid of huge wooden brakeblocks smoking against broad steel tires. Heavy chains, in various arrangements according to the ideas of the individual teamster, held the back wheels from turning. These were the "rough-locks." Where the hill was unusually steep, or covered with ice or snow, more chain would be wrapped around the lower part of the wheel, to dig into the surface and hold the load back. You can imagine what happened when the rough-lock broke and the heavy load relentlessly pushed the frantic team into a plunging run. Such an accident always resulted in disaster. Nearly always horses had to be shot; more often than not the teamster went to the hospital—or the grave.

The skinner's hands were busy with four or six lines, perhaps eight; his right foot was always on the long iron brake lever that rose by his side. That left him one foot to hang on with, and sometimes that wasn't enough. So on each side of the belt was riveted a heavy harness snap

which could be fastened in an iron ring on the seat if the going got too rough.

There were two schools of thought on this subject among the ore-haulers. One held that it was safer to trust to their left foot, hooked under the edge of the foot-board to hold them on the pitching, swaying wagon, and to be free to jump if the outfit went over. The other maintained this was too hard and uncertain—better take a chance on the snaps, have your mind on your business without being distracted by the necessity of holding on, and risk a tip-over, although that meant at best a hard fall, at the worst a hard death under tons of rock. As a matter of fact, what course they actually followed depended on the particular haul.

Overshadowing that subject as a source of argument around the big stove in the bunkhouse, was driving ability. There you really got arguments and occasionally fights. The fights were never fatal, always plain fist work and rough and tumble fighting, without any trimming of gun-play or knives. But the arguments could get pretty warm nevertheless. A whole roomful of tough ore-haulers would hoot in derision at one of their number who boastfully proclaimed that he only turned over three times on a trip from a certain mine, and that always led to trouble.

Some of the old high-sided ore wagons still stand behind deserted stables in the ghost towns of the West, their broad steel tires hanging forlornly from dried-out felloes. But the men of the six-horse roll have vanished from the picture except in the stories of old men.



RUN-AWAY HERO

By
Philip Ketchum



The bullet caught Menninger
in the back, squarely between
the shoulders

Above the thunder of the snarling gun that sought his life, Ed Branca heard, too late, the ancient warning: Run one step from trouble, and you're face-to-face with the Devil!

"I'LL GIVE you fifteen hundred, cash," said Reb Hubbard. "It's my top offer. It's my last offer, Branca. You'll take it."

"Give me until tomorrow to think it over," said Jeff Branca slowly. "Fifteen hundred isn't much, Reb, for six years work."

"It's all I'll pay," said Reb Hubbard. "I'll meet you tomorrow noon in San Esteban at the bank. Be there."

Jeff Branca made no answer. He measured the stony look on Hubbard's face. He watched Hubbard turn and rejoin his

men and ride away. A flush of anger had come into his face. His hand touched his gun but he didn't draw it. He told himself that he would never keep the appointment with Reb Hubbard. He told himself that this was his land and that he would fight for it, but in his heart he knew he was already beaten. Reb Hubbard would get what he wanted. He, Jeff Branca, would sell out and would go somewhere else and would start all over again. The six years he had spent here he would mark off to experience.

In the quiet of the night, Jeff Branca

sat at the table in his cabin and looked at this thing honestly. He was twenty-eight. He had come here when he was twenty-two, with the savings he had accumulated since he had begun working at sixteen. He had bought land and cattle. He had made a start toward independence. The worst years, the hardest years, were over. If it hadn't been for Hubbard's greedy drive for power he could have stayed here and counted on a margin of success. That his small range lay in the way of Hubbard's expansion was something he couldn't have foreseen.

He didn't have to sell, of course. He could stay here. He could fight for his land, but it would be a losing fight. A cold chill ran over Jeff's body. There, if he was honest, was the real story. He didn't have the courage to fight. He could try to deceive himself, of course. He could claim that against Hubbard he had no chance, but reduced to its most simple terms, this meant only that he was afraid.

There was a mirror on the wall by which Jeff shaved. He got to his feet, now, and stared at his reflection. He had a thin, deeply tanned face, a square jaw, steady, gray eyes. It seemed a strong face, but that meant nothing at all. In a sudden rage he tore the mirror from the wall and smashed it to the floor. . . .

FAR down the west slope of the Geronimo mountains, three mornings later, Jeff Branca made a skimpy breakfast from the few supplies he had left. He hadn't shaved since he had left the San Esteban valley. As he rubbed the stubble on his chin he wondered if he looked as disreputable as he felt. He touched the money-belt fastened under his shirt. It was safe. It held fifteen hundred dollars, the proceeds of six years work. He had sold out to Hubbard as he had known he would sell. Fifteen hundred. It wasn't much, but it was enough for a fresh start. He could never have done very well on his

ranch in the San Esteban country. This was what he was telling himself now, over and over. This was what he was trying to believe.

Jeff broke camp through the simple process of saddling his horse and rolling up his blankets and tying them behind the saddle. He mounted, made his way to the mountain trail he had been following, and continued on his way. By noon he had reached the upper flats of a wide valley range land, and in the late afternoon a wagon road led him to the town of Tiburon. He pulled up at the tie rail in front of the Apache hotel. He rented a room. He went to the barber shop for a shave and at dusk, after stabling his horse, he stood at the bar in the High Line saloon and ordered a drink.

Already, he felt like a new man. From the barber, the stableman, and the fellow who ran the hotel he had heard the local gossip and learned a little of this country, too. The principle ranches had been mentioned. Down valley there had recently been some rustling. The rainfall had been good. There was plenty of water. And if he was looking for work, the Spade ranch might take him, or Sam Petterson of the Star Anchor might be able to use him.

Everyone Jeff met seemed friendly. He had a drink with two Spade riders at the bar, listened to their drawling talk. He met Lew Rutgers, a tall, thin faced man who was the sheriff and who had just come back from down valley after an unsuccessful pursuit of the rustlers. The folks around Tiburon seemed to like Rutgers. They joked with him about electing a new man if he wasn't more successful, but it was friendly joking.

"You looking for a job, Branca?" asked the sheriff.

"Maybe," Jeff shrugged. "Have you any ideas, sheriff?"

Rutgers nodded. He called, "Hey, Grover. Come here."

A short, heavy-set man of about forty

who had just entered the saloon moved down to where they were standing.

"Branca," said the sheriff, "this is Grover Cathcart. He and his brother have a place up on the bench. Maybe you can work out a deal. Branca's looking for work, Grover."

"That so?" said Grover.

It occurred to Jeff Branca that it might not be a bad plan to take a temporary job for a while. It would give him a chance to look around, and to measure the possibilities of a ranch in this valley. He could always quit if he wanted to move on.

"We need a man at the Crow Track," Grover Cathcart was saying. "There's more work than Ollie and I can handle. It's not a large ranch, Branca. You could have a cabin to yourself. You would have to pitch in and help with just about everything."

"That would suit me," Jeff agreed. "I had a small place of my own, once."

"Then you would know what to expect. Out at the Crow Track there is only me, my brother and his wife. The work won't be easy."

"Work never is," Jeff grinned. "When do we leave?"

"In about an hour. We ought to have supper first."

Jeff nodded. He was rather pleased with the way things were working out. He had paid for a room that he wouldn't need but that was a small matter.

THE Crow Track ranch was high up against the hills through which Jeff had come. There were three cabins, a barn, and the usual corral. Ollie and his wife, a thin, tired looking woman, occupied the largest of the three cabins. Grover lived in the one which was almost new. Jeff's cabin was the oldest of the three and had been the original building on the ranch. It was well constructed. It reminded him, some, of his cabin back in the San Esteban country.

Jeff ate with the two men in the main cabin. It was usually a silent meal. Neither Grover nor Ollie had much to say at meal-time. Ollie was near the same age as his brother. He was the same build, short, thick-bodied, heavy. He was a surly man, sharp-tempered, gruff. He seemed to have little respect or liking for his wife. He growled at her the same way he did at Jeff or at Grover. He worked hard from sun-up to sun-down. Jeff sometimes wondered what pleasure Ollie got out of life. Grover occasionally went to town and sometimes indulged in a drink. Ollie had no patience with this.

The two brothers however were much alike. Grover, at times, was short of temper as Ollie, and seemed to work just as hard. He too had his surly streaks. There were occasions when he was distinctly unfriendly.

Before a week had passed Jeff was tired of his bargain. It wasn't the work. He could take that, hard though it was. And he had no real quarrel with the Cathcart brothers, but it was increasingly difficult to work with them and to live in the dreary atmosphere of their bitterness.

One evening just before dusk, Hugh Menninger rode into the yard. Menninger had a ranch south of the Crow Track. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, several years older than Jeff. He waved a greeting to Jeff, who was repairing the barn roof and Jeff waved back. He had met Menninger several times and rather liked him.

Ollie opened the cabin door and came outside. He and Menninger started talking. Jeff couldn't hear what they were saying. He went on with his work, then stopped suddenly and looked toward them. Ollie had raised his voice in a sharp denial of something Menninger had said. His hand was on the butt of his gun. He was shaking his head. Menninger spoke. Again and again Ollie shouted his angry denial.

Jeff moved to the ladder at the edge of the roof. Just as he reached it he saw Grover step out of the barn. Grover was holding a rifle. He lifted it to his shoulder. He fired, and the bullet caught Menninger in the back, squarely between the shoulders. Menninger's arms shot into the air. He pitched from the saddle as his horse danced away.

Jeff Branca had no memory of climbing down the ladder. He stood in the yard and watched Grover walk forward and join Ollie and saw both of them standing over the motionless figure of Hugh Menninger, then saw them turn and stare at him.

Fear hit him in that moment. It hit him with all the physical force of a blow to the stomach. It brought a cold, chilling perspiration to his skin. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to think. Ollie and Grover started toward him, Grover still carrying the rifle. They stopped when they were half a dozen paces away. They stared at him just as they had stared at the man they had murdered. Their eyes were hard and cold.

"Menninger had it coming to him, Branca," said Ollie Cathcart. "He accused us of rustling. We're going to take care of things, see? If the sheriff comes out here and questions us, we don't know anything about what happened. Menninger didn't come here today. Do you understand?"

Grover Cathcart was stroking the stock of his rifle. There was a tight, ugly grin on his lips. Jeff moistened his lips. He nodded.

"Don't get too smart to stay alive, Branca," said Grover Cathcart. "You're as deep in this as we are. Play it like we tell you."

Again Jeff nodded. He turned away. He moved back to the barn and leaning against it, retched. He could hear Grover and Ollie laughing at him as they walked away.

MENNINGER'S body was tied across his horse and was moved that night. Ollie Cathcart, who handled this job himself, was quite late getting back to the ranch. Jeff heard him ride in. He heard Ollie and Grover talking but couldn't hear what they said. He was still dazed by what had happened, by the suddenness of it. He had thought of getting away from here as fast as he could, but he knew that if he left now, the killing could be pinned on him. The only safe course to follow was to wait a few days, wait until the Cathcart brothers, to save themselves, would establish his alibi. After that he could pull out and not worry.

The sheriff, accompanied by half a dozen men, rode up to the ranch late the next afternoon. There was a harsh, unsmiling look on Rutger's face. The men with him were grim, watchful.

"Has Hugh Menninger been by here lately?" Rutgers asked.

Grover and Ollie Cathcart had come out into the yard. Jeff had joined them. He was tense, a little breathless.

"Nope," said Ollie, "I haven't seen Menninger for a week. What are you after him for?"

"He's dead," said the sheriff bluntly. "His body was found near Sentinal creek this morning. He was shot in the back."

"Too bad," said Grover. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"His wife told us he left home just after noon yesterday," reported the sheriff. "She said he planned to ride this way. She said he wanted to talk with you about a Two M calf with a Crow Track brand."

"If he had come here with any story like that," said Ollie, "he would have run into an argument. It would only be honest to admit that. As it happens, however, he didn't come here. We were around the ranch all day. Ask Grover. Ask Jeff Branca. If you want to, you can talk to my wife."

"How about it," said the sheriff, star-

ing at Jeff intently, watching his face.

Jeff moistened his lips. Here was his chance. He tried to frame the words he wanted to say, but he couldn't manage it. He shook his head. "Menninger wasn't here."

There was more talk, but Jeff had little part in it. The sheriff's eyes kept searching the yard. He didn't seem satisfied but finally, he and those with him, had to ride away.

The two Cathcart brothers were scornful of the sheriff's visit. They came to Jeff's cabin that night to play cards and to talk. Grover slapped Jeff on the back and praised him for playing it wisely. Ollie chuckled over the story of the mis-branded calf. "There are plenty Two M calves we've mis-branded," he said boastfully. "Menninger was a fool to come here alone."

Jeff played the cards which were dealt to him almost without thinking. He was wondering when it would be safe to leave. This country, which he had liked, he suddenly hated. He wanted to get away. Far away, this time. He would make his new start somewhere else.

Somewhere else. Jeff scowled. He had been honest with himself for a few hours one night, back in the San Esteban country. He could see the same picture tonight. It was not easy to look at. He had run away from San Esteban because he lacked the courage to fight. He was run-

ning away again. What would happen in the days ahead? When a man started running away, where did he stop? Did he ever stop? Was there any place where a man could escape from his fears?

"Your deal, Branca," Ollie growled. "Wake up! What's eatin' you?"

Jeff blinked. He reached for the cards. He shuffled the deck. He was hardly aware of what he was doing.

"Deal 'em out!" Grover snapped.

Jeff shoved the cards together. He stared at these two men who sat at this table with him, stared at their scowling, ugly faces. One of these men was a cold-blooded murderer. The other was equally as guilty. A sudden hatred of them gripped him. He laid down the cards, shoved back his chair. He stood up. He stared at the two brothers. All the anger he was feeling showed in his face, but he didn't know it.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Ollie asked sharply. "Sit down!"

Jeff Branca shook his head. "I'm through," he heard himself saying. "I'll not run away again. I've got to face it sometime or I'll never stop running."

"Got to face what?" Ollie asked. "What are you talking about?"

Ollie had pushed his chair back from the table. His hand was on his gun. His eyes were narrow, watchful. Grover was leaning forward.

(Continued on page 127)

HEADACHE

**UPSET
STOMACH**

**JUMPY
NERVES**



RELIEF!

**THANKS TO FAMOUS
BROMO-SELTZER**

Millions turn to Bromo-Seltzer to relieve ordinary headache three ways. It's famous for giving fast help. Caution: Use only as directed. Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drugstore fountain or counter today. A product of Emerson Drug Company since 1887.



**Fast-Action Border
Novelette**



He flung lead toward the
two gunmen

LAWMAN DEAD

**"Devil's Gulch is Outlaw Heaven,
where there ain't no law, and
there ain't no rope, and here, at
last, we're safe. So stop looking
at that dead marshal's star..."**

CHAPTER ONE

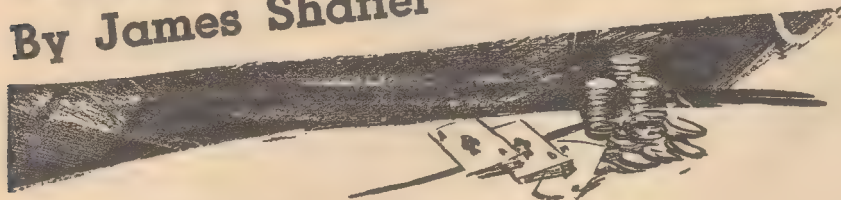
The Devil's Outlaw Heaven

RIP TICE'S little weasel face split into a wide grin as they swung to the ground. He sucked air into his skinny chest and flung his claw-like hands



WANTED— OR ALIVE!

By James Shaffer



out in a wide gesture. "This is the place, Mark," he chortled. "This is the place we been looking for. No law in this town. No sheriff, no marshal, no nothing. Yep, this is the place for us. This is heaven."

Mark Rolland towered over Rip by at least eight inches. Mark wasn't too big;

five feet eleven. And not too heavy; one hundred seventy. But alongside the weasly little Tice, he seemed plenty big.

He shot a sidelong glance at his little saddlemate, his partner since about a month ago when they'd met one stormy night months ago along the owlhoot trail.

"Heaven?" he echoed sarcastically. "I thought the name of this place was Devil's Gulch."

Rip Tice ignored the remark. He untied the bedroll behind his saddle, his tongue going all the time.

"We got nothing to worry about in this town," he crowed. "No law to watch for. We'll check in at the hotel big as life. Take a hot bath and git some clean clothes on and then go buck the tiger. Wine, women and song. Yeah, man!"

"And what'll we use for money for all that?" Mark asked curtly.

Rip laughed. "In a town where there ain't no law, you're asking how we're going to get money?" He chuckled again and slapped the gun on his skinny hip. "Man, there's miners in this town. Miners that work hard and make big dinero. And you wonder how we gonna get some money?"

A hot retort surged to Mark's lips, but he clamped them tight and held the words back. After all, he told himself grimly, he was on the owlhoot. He was wanted by the law. According to the law, he wasn't honest any more. He was just like any coyote or wolf running loose, worth bounty money to the man who would bring him down.

He looked at Rip again, and the growing distaste for his trailmate grew stronger. He and Rip had joined company one dark night, with lawdogs baying at their heels. Mark hadn't liked the arrangement, but he had found out that when you're outside the law, you don't pick your friends. You get whatever comes along. And then, he'd been new to the owlhoot trails, and Rip Tice was a big help in showing him the ropes.

"We'll look for some other way to make a dollar, before we fall back on our guns." Mark said, as he untied his own bedroll.

Rip Tice laughed harshly. "There you go again," he jeered. "Git some sense in your head, Mark. You ain't gonna git no

honest employment from now on out. If you aim to get any money at all, it's got to be my way."

Mark sighed and looked around. Devil's Gulch was a new mining town, less than a year old. But in that year, it had buried no less than four town marshals. And the regional sheriff, at the county seat forty miles away, gave the town a wide berth.

There was nothing pretty about Devil's Gulch. Thrown helter-skelter along a winding valley between two ranges of jagged hills, it consisted of one wide, booming thoroughfare flanked by hastily constructed, garish buildings. A few side streets meandered off the main drag and disappeared into the rocky hills.

"No law, huh?" Mark mused, half aloud. "But a town don't run itself. Somebody's got to run it."

"Sure, somebody has," Rip answered. "And that's the gent we aim to look up. Maybe he can throw something our way. I gotta hunch we'll find him right over there."

He pointed a skinny finger to a huge log building that dominated the whole street. A gaudy sign that spread half the length of the building proclaimed the place to be "Rocky Borden's Palace-o-Fun." Even at this hour, mid-afternoon, sounds of merriment drifted out of the two sets of batwing doors. A piano jangled briskly off key; half drowned by a man's raucous laugh and the shrieking, high pitched giggles of the percentage girls. The Palace evidently never closed.

"Let's check in and then mosey over," Rip said, and led the way to the rickety plank sidewalk, and down it toward the peeled log hotel. Mark flung his bedroll over his shoulder and followed. He was passing the millinery store when the girl stepped out, and he almost bumped into her. He caught himself in time, and tipped his hat. The girl nodded acknowledgement; there was no smile on her face as she stepped past him.

As he turned to continue his way, a man bumped into Mark. The man was reeling drunk. He paid no attention to the bump he'd given Mark, but staggered on past, his bloodshot eyes fastened on something. A moment later Mark heard the scuffle and turned.

THE drunk had flung his arm around the girl's shoulders. The girl had tried to hit him with the ridiculous little parasol she carried, but he'd grabbed that, and it had broken in his grasp.

"C'mon, baby, gimme li'l kiss," the drunk coaxed between hiccoughs. "Jus' a li'l kiss that you—"

"Get away from me!" the girl jerked hard and broke out of his grasp. But the drunk retained a hold on her dress and it ripped at the shoulder. The sight of her bare skin seemed to drive the drunk into a frenzy. She dodged to one side and tripped him. The man went down heavily, and the jar shook him sober for an instant.

"I'll show you—" he snarled. He was coming to his feet, his eyes blazing, his fingers flexing and tensing. He was lunging when Mark hit him behind the ear.

The blow didn't knock him down. The man was too drunk to be hurt. It just shoved him sideways. The drunk shook his head and then swung around toward Mark, lips jerking with hate.

"I think the lady would prefer you call on her formal-like, instead of this," Mark said. The girl's face was white and strained. She shot Mark a quick glance, and her wide eyes thanked him silently. The drunk was mouthing curses; people walking along the sidewalks were beginning to gather in a crowd.

"You must want your guts stomped out, stranger," the drunk snarled.

"I like 'em where they are," Mark went on.

"Then stay outta my business!" He started for the girl again. "I wan' that kiss and I wan' it now!"

The girl eluded him easily, and Mark started forward. "Please!" the girl said quickly. "Don't bother. You've done enough—I can manage—"

But Mark was swinging for the drunk's face. His fist landed with a dull splat and the man went backwards again; this time, his eyes were narrowed slits of wickness. Someone tugged at Mark's sleeve.

"Listen," Rip Tice said nervously. "You ain't got no business gitting in this—we're strangers in this town. Let's go to the hotel. C'mon, let's git acquainted in town before you start anything."

"That's good advice, punk!" the drunk sneered. "Better take it."

"I do my own thinking," Mark rapped back. Miss, go on down the street. I'll see that you're—"

"You asked for it!" the drunk roared and charged.

Mark sidestepped his first clumsy charge and drove his fist into the man's stomach. The drunk gagged and slowed up. Rip Tice edged in and worried Mark's sleeve again.

"C'mon, Mark," he whined. "It ain't no good to get in a fight right away. Wait'll we see who runs this town. Let's git acquainted. You never can tell who you're fighting—"

That was all he had time for. The drunk had recovered, and he came in again. The man was clumsy, staggering drunk, and it would have been sheer cruelty to have prolonged the fight. Mark stepped away from his swinging fists and then shot his own to the man's chin. He wavered, and Mark finished the job. He followed with his left and then swung his right once more. The man sighed. His eyes rolled upward and he sagged at the knees.

Mark watched a moment, then turned to go. He'd taken but one step, however when he saw the look of swift alarm in Rip's eyes, and heard the short, suppressed scream of the girl. He tried to dodge, but they were all over him.

He never knew exactly how many there were. At times it seemed there were only three; other times, it seemed like fifty. The first blow he'd received was on the back of the head, and it dazed him. He turned, caught a fleeting glimpse of Rip Tice backing hurriedly away.

Mark swung at the first man to rush him. His blow landed, but it was weak. It didn't stop the man, and the next instant Mark was staggering backwards, trying to fight off two more men. He swung at their faces, at their bodies; but the treacherous blow on the base of his skull had done its work. He was groggy and his punches lacked steam. He felt himself being driven backwards, and then he was falling. Boots slammed into his body, blackness closed in.

CHAPTER TWO

Rocky Borden Runs This Town

HE FOUGHT back to a half-dazed consciousness. At first he thought the boots were still at work, but it was just the pain that pounded and throbbed through him. He was flat on his back, and could see a high raftered ceiling above him, and there seemed to be rows of shelves reaching up to the ceiling. A sharper pain than the rest suddenly ran through his ribs. He groaned and tried to reach the injured place.

"He's coming out of it," a distant voice said. Mark shut his eyes tight, then opened them and tried to focus them on three blurred figures. Gradually, he made out the features of Rip Tice. He didn't know the other two men.

"Where am I?"

"In my store," one of the men said. His face came in focus, a suave, blocky face, ruddy in complexion, and topped by a head of red hair. "I'm Carrots Dorsey; run the general store in Devil's Gulch. This is Doc Edwards."

"We brung you here after they quit beating you," Rip Tice put in quickly. "Mark, I tried to tell you to stay outa that fight. Lordly, you jumped on Rocky Borden's right hand man!"

"Is that bad?" Mark muttered.

"No, by hell!" a voice bellowed. It was the doctor talking. The medico couldn't have weighed more than a hundred thirty pounds, but he had a voice like the roar of a bull. "No by hell, that isn't bad! It's good! Best thing that ever happened to Devil's Gulch. It's high time somebody beat the hell out of Tuck Tolbert. Him and the rest of the gun crew that keeps Rocky Borden in power in Devil's Gulch —"

"Careful Doc!" Carrots Dorsey said nervously. "Walls have got ears, you know."

"Just the same," the little medico thundered on, "this young man deserves a vote of thanks from the whole community for what he did."

Rip got hold of Mark's arm and pulled him off the counter. "C'mon, Mark," he grunted. "Let's git up to the hotel. Right now. A good hot bath will fix you up."

Mark slid off the counter and allowed Rip to lead him along the aisle of the store toward the back door. Doc's voice was still booming after him.

"Young man, if you have a moment, I have a proposition—"

"Don't listen to him," Rip grunted. "Let's hurry." Half dragging, half leading him, Rip hurried out the back door, across some litter-strewn back yards and into the back entrance of the hotel. He'd already registered and they went right on up to their room.

"They's a bathtub at the end of the hall," Rip told him. "Real iron one. Go ahead and take a bath. Soak some of that soreness out. I'll be back."

"Where you going?"

"Never mind. I got things to do. I'll be back time you've had your bath."

The weasly little gunman turned and hurried down the uncarpeted hallway and on down into the lobby. Mark stumbled to the bathroom. The bath soaked some of the soreness out of his tired body. He stayed in the tub until somebody pounded on the door, for the use of the tub, then went back to his own room and flung himself across the bed. Rip came in a little later, his sly face wreathed in smiles.

"It's all fixed, partner," he chuckled. "O! Rip fixed everything. We're in solid in this town."

"What're you talking about?" Mark demanded suspiciously.

"I been over to see Rocky Borden," Rip went on. "I explained everything about the fight. Told him you didn't know who you was picking on. It's all fixed. Rocky's gonna take us on. We gonna work for him."

"What kind of work?"

"Rip's eyes widened in astonishment. "Don't be a fool! What kind of work, he says! Why, Rocky runs this town. And there's some people—like that mouthy doctor, that don't like the way he runs things. So Rocky hires a crew to see that things run smooth. We're gonna be part of that crew. Git your clothes on—we're going over to the Palace."

Mark sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his boots on. He kept thinking of that girl, and the look of gratitude she'd given him when he'd jumped that drunk.

He kept remembering the doc's words, something about a vote of thanks for beating up Tuck Tolbert.

And then he thought of Rip Tice; and he could see Rip sidling over to Rocky Borden's Palace-of-Fun, fawning and scraping in front of Rocky to get in the man's good graces. The picture brought a wave of revulsion to him and he started to fling his boots angrily across the room.

THEN he remembered something else, his own dad and brother dangling at the end of ropes. That had been years ago, and he'd tried to forget it. He'd worked hard to kill that memory, and he thought he had. Maybe he would have forgotten it, too, but his neighbors hadn't let him. And now there was a fresher memory on his mind.

The memory of a hard-faced sheriff, backed by a stony-faced posse, arresting him. He remembered the sheriff's admission that there was no real evidence against him, and the cynical remark of one of the possemen.

"Your name's Rolland," he had sneered. "That's proof enough for me that you're guilty as hell!"

He remembered a mad break for freedom and days without end of being hunted and chased; of never knowing what it was to get a night's sleep, of going hungry; of killing one horse after another in an effort to shake that posse. He re-

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membered riding into towns with his hat pulled low, and the chill that would run up and down his spine when he felt the impact of a lawman's eyes on him.

But this town, he told himself fiercely, this town of Devil's Gulch didn't have any law. No law but that rodded by Rocky Borden. And he could work for Rocky Borden. It would be the same as if he were wearing a deputy's badge in any other town. He pulled his boots on and stood up, shutting off the memory of the look that girl had given him, and the booming words of the runty little medico.

"Let's go."

He followed Rip out of the hotel, and the hotel, and the moment he hit the street, he felt the quiet tension that gripped Devil's Gulch. The impact of the eyes of the townspeople on him was like a physical blow. He saw Doc Edwards and Carrots Dorsey watching him from the doorway of the store. The quiet was profound as he and Rip crossed the street and pushed into the Palace.

It was almost dark now, and the Palace was beginning to fill up for its nightly carouse. The raucous noise of the patrons almost drowned out the sound of a tinny piano, and of a girl singing. Rip wriggled his way through the crowd toward the bar, with Mark trailing behind him.

"Two whiskeys," Rip told the bartender, "and tell Rocky that Rip Tice and Mark Rolland would like to see him."

The man nodded and slid two shot glasses in front of them. Mark picked his up. As he lifted it to his mouth, he became aware that the piano was silent; the girl had stopped singing. He gulped the drink down, then turned.

The girl! She was standing a few feet away, her hands on her hips, watching him coldly. His eyes drifted over her figure, taking in the spangled costume she wore, and the heave stage makeup on her face. She spoke, and he realized she had been the singer.

"Take my advice stranger," her voice was harsh and grating, "as long as you're in Devil's Gulch, keep your nose out of other people's business. Savvy?"

Mark nodded slowly. "I understand that—and a lot of other things," he replied quietly. His eyes shuttled past the girl to the pasty face of one of the gamblers. The man was watching the whole proceedings intently. A faint flicker of a smile crossed his face at the girl's words.

"Rocky'll see you two now," the bartender cut in, and then added to Rip: "You know where to go."

Rip nodded eagerly and grabbed Mark's arm. The Palace began to fill with sound again as the incident was forgotten. Rip led the way out of the main barroom and into a long hallway. Mark allowed himself to be led along without resistance. There was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd jumped into a fight that day to save a dance hall girl, who didn't want help, from being mauled by a drunk! He didn't know whether to laugh or curse.

Rip knocked on the second door down the hallway, and a voice told them to come in. Mark blinked at the sight of the office they entered. He had never seen such elegance before; let alone in a place like Devil's Gulch. There was a thick carpet on the floor. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings, and the furniture was of heavy oak. A huge desk dominated the room. He studied the man seated behind

ROCKY BORDEN was grossly fat. The fat slopped over edges of his chair; his fat jowls seeming to blend in with his neck, and they quivered at the slightest movement of his body. There was a huge platter of meat on the desk. Rocky picked up a morsel, popped it into his mouth and licked his greasy fingers with a sucking sound. His chins quivered and a deep laugh rumbled out of his body. He turned.

"Is this the hombre that worked you

over, Tuck?" Mark looked around. The light of the chandelier lit up only the desk; the walls of the office were in gloom. And now he noticed that men lounged along the walls; gun-hung men that eyed him with cold disdain. Tuck Tolbert, the drunk he'd hit that afternoon, scowled darkly.

"I was drunk, or he'd never of done it," he rasped. He shoved away from the wall. "If he wants to try it again—"

Rocky waved him back. Mark noticed that the man wore a glittering diamond ring on his forefinger. The fat fingers searched around the platter for another piece of meat, and the sucking noise came again.

"You know my rules, Tuck. No fighting among my crew."

"He better not go shooting off his lip around town what he done to me," Tuck Tolbert grunted.

"What you want us to do, boss?" Rip Tice cut in quickly, and Mark turned a little sick at the fawning note in Rip's voice. Rocky found another tasty morsel, and his jowls quivered as he chewed it reflectively.

"Been too much grumbling among the miners about my games being crooked," he said presently. "Bad for business. Can't let that kind of talk go on." He sucked his greasy fingers. "Everybody in town knows my men. When they see one of them coming, they shut up their griping."

"But they don't know us, huh?" Rip grinned.

Rocky nodded. "Git out there an' circulate. Find out who's spreading that talk. And when they start home to-night—" his fat hand seemed to disappear, it moved so fast. When it stopped moving, it held a fancy little derringer, almost hidden in the fat folds of the fingers. "I pay bonuses for jobs done right," Rocky Borden finished with a belly-shaking laugh.

"Them orders is clear enough," Rip

Tice nodded. He nudged Mark and they turned to go. Tuck Tolbert pushed himself away from the wall and sauntered in front of Mark.

"One more thing you'd better get straight, Rolland. That filly—Sally Petersen—I picked her for myself. See?"

Mark started to shrug his shoulders. That was the thing to do, he told himself. Shrug his shoulders and forget the whole thing. What was one more dance hall girl, more or less? To hell with it! But the words that came out were different.

"Didn't seem like you were having any luck this afternoon," he snapped back. Tuck's battered face turned a shade more purple.

"She'll come around—before I'm through with her. She's been here a month—she won't hold out much longer," he growled. "And you'll get a bullet in your guts if you try and interfere, see?"

"C'mon, Mark," Rip urged. "We got work to do." He jerked hard on Mark's arm. Rocky Borden's chuckle drifted through the silence.

"Ah, me!" he laughed. "To be young again—and to be in love!"

Mark scowled darkly as Rip half dragged him through the door. He could still hear Rocky's mocking chuckle as they walked down the hallway and into the main barroom of the Palace.

"You take the roulette tables," Rip said, "and I'll circulate through the card games. Keep your ears open, 'cause we could sure use that bonus!"

Mark shrugged and turned away. And then he saw the girl, sitting on a chair over by the piano. He pushed his way through the crowd till he was standing before her. She looked up, and her face went white. The piano player was having a beer and was paying no attention.

"You shouldn't be around me. Tuck—"

"Just had a talk with Tuck," he told her, "back in Rocky's office."

Her face turned hard again. "Then—"

they you went to work for Rocky?"

"Anything wrong with that?" he rasped. "You work for him, don't you?"

Her laugh was high and brittle. "Of course—and make good money at it, too! Here's Tuck. Be seeing you." She swung away and he saw her walk over to Tuck Tolbert and slide her arm through his. "I need a drink, Tuck."

Tolbert leered broadly and started off toward the bar with her. Mark swore under his breath and shoved his way toward the roulette tables. He stared unseeingly at the little ball as it spun around, and listened without hearing as the croupier called the numbers and raked in the chips. He told himself savagely that he needed to get that girl out of his mind; to forget her.

CHAPTER THREE

A Man Can Always Die

HE WAS in the only spot where he could ever have any peace, he reminded himself. He was in a town where there was no law, and he was working for the man who ran the town. And he could stay here as long as he liked—if he'd get that girl out of his mind.

"That damn wheel is crooked!" Mark jerked back to the present. The roulette table was packed with miners. The man who'd made the statement was standing less than three feet from Mark, and his words brought a growl of agreement from half a dozen throats. And then silence; a silence heavy with the threat of danger.

The dealer let his pale beady eyes drift over the players. His lips barely moved as he spoke.

"Who says the wheel is crooked? Step out and say it again!"

The miners shuffled their feet, and stared hard at the floor, or into space. The silence around the table was beginning to spread across the Palace, as other

players stopped their games to listen. Two gun-hung men were moving slowly and silently through the crowd. Mark recognized them as men he'd seen in Rocky's office. The houseman watched their approach, and his voice lifted a little with confidence.

"Who says this wheel is crooked?" he rasped. "Step out and say your speech!"

The crowd at the table began to shift uneasily. Two men backed away and edged off. Mark could see the fear in their faces, the nervous shifting of their eyes. The houseman laughed harshly.

"Well, if the gent ain't got the guts to back up his words—the game will go—"

"I don't know who said it first," Mark said quietly, and his words carried to every corner of the Palace, "but I'm saying it now—the wheel is crooked!"

The noise in the Palace chopped off suddenly, like a nickelodeon piano that has suddenly broken down. He saw the two gunmen who had been walking toward the table stop in their tracks. Their cold faces showed surprise, and a deadly alertness as they awaited orders for their next move. Pink spots of anger showed in the pasty cheeks of the houseman standing beside the table.

For a moment, the miners who had been playing the wheel stood their ground, pressing close to Mark, then a man heaved a gusty sigh and shuffled back a step. Mark's lips twisted sardonically. He was a fool, he told himself, to have expected any help from the miners. They had been too long under the rule of Rocky Borden to revolt now.

One by one, the miners began to drift away from him, and suddenly, he felt naked and exposed, standing there by the table.

"You've had too much redeye, friend," the dealer said, his lips barely moving. "Better go sleep it off."

"I'm not drunk," Mark said, surprised at how loud his voice was in the sudden

hush. "That wheel is crooked. So is every wheel and every game in the house, I reckon."

"By hell! I'll bet he's right!" somebody croaked suddenly. "Let's find out—"

"Tuck!"

That one word sounded like a thunder-clap in the Palace. Mark whirled to face the source of the sound. In one fleeting instant, he got a confused glimpse of a lot of things. The man who'd yelled that one word was Rocky Borden. The fat man stood in the hallway leading to his office. His fat jowls were quivering with rage, and his jewelled forefinger was curled around the trigger of his derringer.

Mark saw that, even as his eyes were shuttling toward Tuck Tolbert. The gunman was shoving his way from the bar, his hands streaking toward his guns; a vast grin of evil satisfaction spreading over his face. Tuck was going to enjoy this job. Mark dropped to his knees quickly, at the same time catching sight of the girl. She was racing after Tuck, and just before the first shot came, he saw her jostle Tuck's arm.

GUNFIRE exploded in the Palace like a charge of dynamite. Mark was on one knee. He was confused, not knowing which target to pick first. The two gunmen ear the table were closest. He flung lead that way; saw one man jerk and grab his stomach. Then guns were blasting from every direction.

He fell to the floor sideways, guns still hammering. One grim thought was uppermost in his mind. He only had seconds to live. In those seconds, he wanted to get Rocky Borden. He twisted around trying to settle his sights on the fat man.

Then, curiously, he heard a faint popping sound intermingled with the roar of the heavy guns. The popping sound came steadily through the roar of the big guns, and Mark realized that the lights were going out!

The big chandelier right overhead exploded with a loud tinkle of glass, and Mark's vicinity was bathed in gloom. He scuttled behind the roulette table. The popping sound continued, and another big ceiling light went out. The Palace was becoming murky all over. Mark flung himself to a new position. And then one more light went out and the Palace was in utter blackness.

"Keep shooting!" Rocky Borden's voice was roaring through the blackness. "Keep shooting—keep the place lit up with gunfire till you get him!"

Gunfire was concentrating in the corner where Mark was. A bullet burned his cheek. Another tore through his shirt; a third flung splinters into his face. He dared not fire back, and yet he knew to stay there another moment would be suicide. Each gunflash lit the corner up bright as day. He took a deep breath and leaped.

Rocky Borden was still roaring orders. Mark ran straight toward the fat man's voice. The Palace was a madhouse of men scrambling to get out. Time and again, Mark stumbled into cursing, struggling men. He tripped and sprawled on his face. He rose, kept racing toward Rocky's voice.

The fat man's voice was very near when some one struck a match. It flared briefly, then a lantern's flame leaped to life. By its light, Mark saw that Borden had leaped to safety behind the bar. Just ahead loomed the dark mouth of the hallway. He jumped for it and pounded down its length. Shouts and gunfire still filled the Palace as Mark found the back door. He shot the bolt back, flung the door open and leaped outside.

He stumbled over a pile of empty bottles and felt the broken glass gash him in half a dozen places, then he was on his feet running. Lights sprang up in the Palace. For a second the noise in there died down, then it erupted again with a

roar. Mark's mouth was grim. They had discovered he had escaped.

He hunkered down in the shadow of a high board fence and stuffed fresh shells into his guns. He could hear men pouring out of the Palace now, ranging all over town, looking for him. He sucked air into his tortured lungs and took stock of his situation.

It wasn't good, he told himself grimly. He had every gunnie in Rocky Borden's pay hunting him down. Mentally, he checked his position. He was about two blocks from the livery stable, where his horse was. His best bet; his only bet, was to get to the livery and leave town—fast!

Three men raced down a nearby alley, paused not thirty feet from his hiding place, then split up and started searching in three directions. One of them started moving toward Mark. He held his breath till the man was close; then stepped softly forward. He lifted his gun and brought it down heavily on the man's head.

"That ought to open the way to the livery stable, maybe," he thought, and started off. He climbed a fence, worked his way to one of the back streets, then turned toward the livery.

"Mark!"

He jerked as if he'd been touched with a red hot poker. He whirled, guns centering on the speaker; and the breath gusted out of him almost like a sob. It was the girl—Sally Peterson. She had a black coat thrown over her shoulders to hide the shiny spangled of her dress. A moment later, she was by his side, gripping his arm.

"I've got a horse!" she whispered. "Under that tree—get on it and ride!"

"How'd you—I mean what—" He broke off, stammering in confusion.

"I kept my eye on you—saw you go out the back door—and figured you'd try to make it to the livery. Here's the horse. Now, Mark, hurry!"

In the darkness, he ran his hands over

the animal's bony ribs, its skinny flanks and knobly legs.

"This horse ain't good for two miles," he told her. "I wouldn't have a chance. I'll make it to the livery and get my own mount."

"Mark, they'll kill you. You wouldn't have a chance! This horse—"

"They'd kill me before I got a mile on that," he rapped back; then his voice dropped. "It ain't that I ain't grateful for what you done. Listen! I got to leave this town tonight—but I'll be back—for you!"

She was in his arms then, clinging desperately to him. For a moment, he allowed himself the luxury of forgetting everything but her closeness, then he shoved her away.

"I'LL be back!" he said softly and turned away. He heard her catch her breath in a little sob, then heard her racing footsteps. A block away, he could see the big black building of the livery stable. He moved toward it. The noise of the pursuit through town was dying down. He quirked his lips in a smile. Maybe Rocky had given up the chase. After all, he was merely a drifting gunhand; he couldn't upset Rocky's power here in Devil's Gulch.

The livery stable seemed quiet enough. He catfooted past a warehouse and paused a moment, studying the back door of the livery. There was no movement; he started forward. He'd covered half the distance when he heard a faint sound. He whirled. A blinding flash exploded ten feet away.

Something slammed against the side of his head. The whole world burst into a million bright lights, then faded into utter blackness. . . .

He came to struggling to draw his gun, and feeling that he was being smothered. He lashed out blindly with his fists.

"Keep the pillow over his face till he

stops yelling!" The booming voice sounded familiar, and Mark relaxed. Someone took the pillow from his face and bright lamp light struck his eyes. He blinked and looked around him. Doc Edwards was bending over him. Carrots Dorsey, the storekeeper, was standing to one side, holding the pillow. Then he saw Sally Peterson watching him anxiously.

"Trying to smother me?" he gasped.

"Trying to keep you from squawling your head off and letting the town know you're still alive," Doc Edwards said sourly. "You're supposed to be dead—or darn near it."

"How come? And how did I get here—wherever I am?"

"You're in my office," Doc Edwards told him. "You got here because Sally came and got me. We got to the livery just after you'd been shot. Tuck Tolbert wanted to put a finishing bullet into your head, but I convinced him you were already dead—or would die in a minute."

"Doc's word carries a little weight in this town," Carrots Dorsey said. "They had an epidemic last winter and he saved some of those gunnies' worthless hides."

"It won't last long," the girl broke in. "Tuck wasn't convinced that Mark was dead. They'll be over pretty soon to make sure. Doc! You've got to help Mark get away before daylight!"

Mark sat up and gingerly felt the thick bandage around his head. He glanced at a battered clock on the wall, and a startled exclamation broke past his lips.

"Yeah," Doc said drily. "It's almost daybreak now. That bullet rip along your skull put you out for most of the night."

"All the more reason why you've got to help him get out of town right now, Doc!" the girl broke in swiftly. As soon as daylight comes and the miners have gone back to work, Rocky will send men over to finish the job."

Dorsey explained to Mark what had happened. The miners hadn't liked the

shooting of Mark Rolland the night before. They'd been ugly and mean after Tuck Tolbert had shot him down. To stave off further trouble, Rocky Borden had called for free drinks for the whole town.

"Rocky came near to losing his grip on the town last night," Dorsey explained. "He had to pass out free liquor all night to keep the miners from raising hell over your being shot. You see," he added with a dry chuckle, "you were something of a hero for telling Rocky his tables were crooked."

"I don't feel like a hero," Mark grunted. "Doc, if you'll loan me a horse, I'll be on my way. I won't give you no more trouble."

"Sure," Doc Edwards boomed. "I'll loan you a horse, Mark Rolland." His voice took on an edge. "I'll loan you a horse so's you can tuck your tail between your legs and run like a kicked hound dog!"

"Huh?" Mark's mouth fell open in surprise.

"When a cur wants to run, the best thing to do is give him room," Doc Edwards went on, "so I'll give you plenty of room to run, Mark Rolland. I got a horse out back that'll run fast enough even to suit you!"

"LISTEN, Doc," Mark said thickly. "There ain't nothing in this town for me 'cept a belly full of lead. I'm gitting out while the gitting's good."

"Sure, save your mangy hide," Doc Edwards grunted. "Save it, for all it's worth to you. I was a fool to figure the way I did."

"Figure what?" Mark asked in a puzzled tone.

"Figure that you had the guts to stand up to Rocky Borden!" Doc Edwards snapped. "You've stood up to his crew twice, and I figured it was because you had the guts to do it. But I see I was

wrong. It wasn't guts that made you do it—it was just plain orneriness."

"What the hell good would it do me to stand up to Rocky Borden?" Mark almost shouted in his anger.

"It would clean the town up, that's what it would do. You've stood up twice to Borden and his crew. The town wasn't prepared for those two times. But if you tried it a third time, the town'd back you up."

"So what?" Mark asked suddenly.

"So what? I'll tell you what. It would bring law and order to this town of Devil's Gulch, that's what."

Mark laughed, a harsh, rasping sound. "Law and order," he sneered. "That's why I came to Devil's Gulch in the first place, because there was no law and order. To hell with law and order!"

Doc Edwards turned to Dorsey. "Carrots, go saddle my horse and give it to Rolland. Mighta known this mangy owl-hooter didn't have any guts. We shore made a mistake thinking he did have."

"Who said I didn't have guts?" Mark snarled. "I ain't running from any single man in Borden's crew—not even Borden himself. But a man can't fight a whole army like Borden has!"

Doc Edward's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Supposing I could fix it for you to take on that crew, one by one? Think you'd have guts enough to take 'em on thata-way? Aw, hell, what am I arguing for—git the horse, Carrots!"

"Just a minute, Doc!" Mark rasped, grabbing the medico by the shirt front. "What's this about taking on Borden's crew one by one? How come you think you could manage that? From what I saw of Borden, he'd never let himself be sucked into fool play like that."

"Not if he could help it—but this time, I don't think he'd be able to help it. But what the hell—your horse is waiting."

"Let it wait," Mark growled. "Ain't nobody going around telling me I ain't

got no guts, savvy? I won't take that!"

"Doc, I never knew you to act this way before," Sally Peterson broke in. "What's come over you? You don't have any right to talk Mark into doing this fool thing!"

"I buried the last town marshal we had," Doc Edwards went on, pulling open a drawer of his desk. "His badge and other belongings just naturally fell into my hands. Nobody else wanted them. Here's his badge. Pin it on, Rolland."

"Aw right, I got it on," Mark said, as he fastened the badge to his shirt. "Now what?"

"I'll go first," Doc said. "When you hear the noise at the Palace die down, you step out of here and start that way. Understand?"

"I understand that he'll be killed!" Sally Peterson cried. "And all because you've suddenly gone loco, Doc!"

"Nope, I ain't loco," Doc Edwards boomed and headed for the door. "Be ready—as soon as the noise dies down."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Redemption

HE OPENED the door and was gone. Carrots Dorsey was still out back with the Doc's horse, and Mark and the girl were alone. She came across the room and put her arms around him.

"Run, Mark, run!" she urged. "Get that horse out back and go! Doc's gone crazy—I don't know what's the matter with him."

"I don't like what he said about me," Mark said.

"It was just his talk to rile you up so you would try to fight the whole Borden gang. Can't you see?"

Mark remained silent. He moved toward the back door of Doc's office and opened it. Out back, in the dim half-light of early dawn, he could see the saddled horse standing ready, could hear the jingle of the bridle as the horse tossed its

head impatiently. And up the street, he could hear the sound of revelry coming from the Palace; the sounds of a maudlin, drunken crowd.

"I dunno what Doc's game was, trying to make me fight," he muttered, "but I ain't—"

He broke off suddenly and strained his ears, listening. The sound from the Palace was dying down. One moment, the roar from the Palace filled the whole little town of Devil's Gulch. The next moment, it was merely a muted rumble.

"That's your cue!" Mark jumped at the sound of Carrots Dorsey's voice from the shadows.

"Maybe I ain't dancing to the tune that Doc's playing," Mark retorted.

Dorsey sighed from the darkness. "Then it's goodbye Doc. He's gone into the Palace to fling down a challenge to Borden and his men. He was going to tell Borden that you'd meet his crew one by one as they left the Palace. *One by one!*"

"They wouldn't play it thataway. They'd all come helling out of there at once."

"No, the miners would see that the first man would come out alone. They'd see that you got a fair shake. If they knew you was going to stand up to Rocky Borden, they'd side you. They'd see to it that Rocky and his crew didn't pull a fast one."

Mark licked his lips. They were suddenly hot and dry. The horse stamped impatiently.

"The first man'll be coming out of the Palace in a minute. It'll be Tuck Tolbert," Carrots Dorsey went on relentlessly. "If you ain't out there to meet him, the miners'll cave in. They won't even try to protect Doc. Doc won't git out of the Palace alive. And there won't ever be another man that'll try to buck Rocky."

Mark drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. The horse stamped again and whickered softly. Up town, the noise from

the Palace was dying to a whisper. Suddenly, a man shouted. It was a joyous, happy shout. Others too it up. It sounded like cheering. Then Mark could hear the faint sound of Doc's voice quieting the crowd.

"Doc's got the whole story out now," Carrots went on. "That was the miners cheering the idea. Rocky Borden wouldn't try to pull nothing crooked now." He



Tuck Tolbert

paused. "Within the next three-four minutes, we'll know whether Devil's Gulch will have law and order—or whether we'll have Rocky Borden."

Law and order. Law and order. The words dinned through Mark's mind. It was on account of law and order that he was here to begin with; that he was riding the owlhoot trail. Law and order had made him an outcast. And he was being asked to fight—maybe to die—for law and order.

A queer laugh broke past his lips. He stepped out of the back door and walked swiftly around the house and out into the

street. Lights gleamed dully up ahead. Lights from the Palace.

But that was all that came out of the Palace. There was no noise; no sound coming from it. Mark rubbed the palms of his hands hard against his pants leg and hit the middle of the street. One step; two steps—the way seemed to stretch endlessly before him.

He jerked nervously as the batwing doors of the Palace squeaked open. A man stepped into the street. The light wasn't good enough to identify him. He was only a black blob in the murky dawn.

"That's Tuck Tolbert, Marshal!" It was Carrots Dorsey's voice. "Take your time killing him—you gotta lot of work!"

A CHOKED curse seemed to explode from the other man. Mark saw a blur of motion, and realized that Tuck was going for his gun. He faded to one side, his own gun lifting. Tuck got in the first shot, but his aim was bad. The slug whined past Mark's head. His own gun was level now. It centered on the murky shadow ahead, and he pulled the trigger.

Tuck Tolbert screamed. The scream seemed to rip clean from his guts. He staggered and then his gun was blazing wildly. Mark dropped to one knee and fired again. Strangely, he was following Dorsey's advice, taking time. The second slug sent Tuck to his knees, and the third slammed him to the dust in a huddled heap.

Mark got to his feet. His knees were shaky, and he took a deep breath to quiet his jumpy nerves. He wanted a minute or two to get set, but Carrots Dorsey was yelling again.

"He's got the first one, Doc!" Dorsey bellowed. "Send out the next one!"

Mark sobbed a curse, wishing that Dorsey would shut up. He needed a moment before the next man came out. But Dorsey wasn't waiting.

Sudden sound exploded at the back of

the Palace. Men cursed and Mark could hear boots thumping the ground. Someone in the Palace yelled, and then a gun exploded. A half dozen guns answered from the back of the saloon. Mark stared that way in surprise; then he became aware of the fact that Carrots Dorsey was at his side.

"Here they come, Mark," Dorsey said. "We flushed 'em—the whole gang. Let's take 'em!"

The storekeeper dropped to one knee and lifted a sawed-off shotgun. Mark could see men running around the corner of the Palace now, their guns blasting toward him. Dorsey's shotgun cut loose and two men folded and fell.

"This way, boys!" Doc Edwards' voice boomed as he came thundering out of the front door of the Palace. A crowd of miners surged at his heels. They raced to intercept the crew leaving the back door.

Mark came to life then. He lifted his gun; pulled trigger on a running man and saw him sag downward. Then he saw what he'd been looking for. A grossly fat figure racing for the nearest hitchrack.

"Rocky Borden!" Mark yelled. "This way!"

Rocky whirled. Mark caught a glimpse of his fancy little derringer just before it spat flame. He heard the whine of the pellet at the same instant that he pulled his trigger. Rocky Borden stopped as if he'd run into a stone wall. Mark lifted his gun for another shot, but it wasn't necessary. The miners led by Doc had rounded the Palace now, and their guns blasted a bedlam of noise. Rocky Borden was leaning against the hitchrack, one hand clutching his chest, the other raised in surrender. . . .

FIFTEEN minutes later, Mark was saddling his horse at the livery stable. Doc Edwards strolled in. Mark looked at him, then tested the cinch.

"Got any more dirty work you want

done?" Mark asked, faintly sarcastic.

"You done it all. What we didn't kill, we got locked up—waiting till we build a jail," Doc said complacently. "Ain't leaving us, are you? What's your rush?"

"Devil's Gulch'll have law and order soon," Mark said tightly. "So I—"

"Is that the real reason?" Doc asked.

"Or is it Sally Peterson?"

The barb hit home. Mark flushed. "Mebbeso," he grunted. "When I first met her I figured she was just a dance hall singer—the right type for an owlhooter like me. But it's time I moved on. I've—I've learned things."

"Like for instance that Sally came here as my nurse—and darn near starved. The miners were losing their money to Rocky Borden. There wasn't none left to pay a nurse. It was take a job singing at the Palace or go hungry."

"That's just about how I added it up," And I'm outside the law. I'm leaving now—while leaving's good."

"I know you've been outside the law," Doc said quietly. "You blabbed your head off both times I fixed you up. That's why I picked you for the job of cleaning up this town."

"Figured if an outlaw got killed it was small loss?"

"Figured it would be a good way for a man to take up his lawful life again," Doc grinned. "Listen, Mark, like I told

you, I fell heir to the last marshal's effects. When you talked the first time you was knocked cuckoo, I looked through the old reward dodgers. I found one on you—and I found something else. It was a recall notice. The old charges against you have been dropped. You've been a free man for six weeks."

Mark gasped. "And you riled me into fighting anyhow? How come?" he demanded angrily.

"Lots of times—when a man's been on the owlhoot, he ain't worth saving. I wanted to be sure you was." He paused. "Devil's Gulch still needs a marshal."

Mark shook his head. "I ain't no gunfighter. If Dorsey hadn't yelled at Tolbert and rattled him, I'd never got him."

"You ain't no gunfighter, but you got guts. That's what rodding the law takes—"

Mark shook his head again. Doc started to argue, and just then Sally Peterson came into the stable. She smiled at the medico and then went over to Mark.

"He'll take the job, Doc. A man's got to have some kind of income to get married on, hasn't he?"

Mark grinned. He still owed Doc a swift kick in the pants for tricking him into fighting like he did. But he figured he'd wait till after the honeymoon to give it to him.

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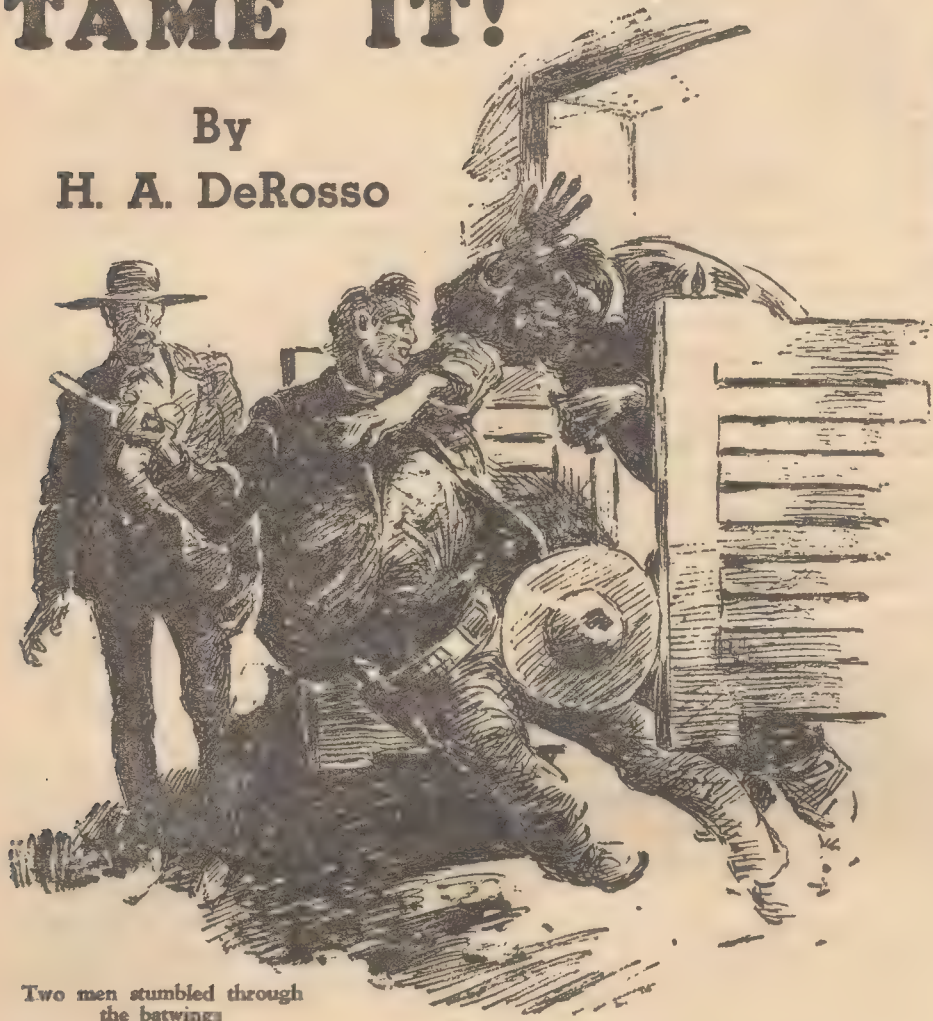


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IT'S YOUR TOWN— TAME IT!

By
H. A. DeRosso



Two men stumbled through
the batwings

His guns alone, Dan Burkett knew, could make that roaring hell-town safe for honest, peaceful men. The cost was small—a bitter, solitary, outcast's life upon a ghostly, never-ending trail.

HE COULD see them waiting for him. In the twilight the cigarette made a soft, iridescent glow. Dan Burkett's steps slowed, halted, and that faint, indefinable fear touched his spine. He remained motionless in the path, watching the glow of the cigarette, seeing the black blotches of shadow the two men made against his cabin.

For a moment Burkett knew the urge to turn back, but that would be running

away again as he'd run on so many instances these past few weeks, and he'd never been the kind to run from anything, not even from this strange, intangible fear.

It was one of those soft Alaskan evenings. The stars were just poking out, bright and very close overhead. A soft wind came sougling through the pines and spruces, stirring the needles to a persistent whispering. To the north, moving across the sky in long, shimmering swaths, the aurora borealis began to play.

This was so different, thought Burkett, from the endless, monotonous sweep of the wind over the flat Kansas prairie, the bitter, biting force of the wind driving across the Arizona high country in winter, or the fetid warmth of a breeze off the Nevada desert. . . .

Burkett sighed and moved on up the path. They noticed him coming and the murmur of their voices stilled.

In the silence, Burkett called out softly, "Evening, boys."

They returned his greeting. There were two of them. One was John Farrar, mayor of this settlement of Kiskiyou. A solid, chunky man in his late fifties, he sat with his back propped against the wall of the cabin Burkett was building. Farrar had eyes of washed-out blue, and the look of a soulful dog about his wide mouth. But there was a contrasting firmness in the jut of his narrow chin.

His companion, Harry Axtell, who ran the general store, stamped out his cigarette. A tall, gaunt man, Axtell stood with drooping shoulders, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Burkett waited. He knew what was coming.

"I could begin by talking about the weather," Farrar said. "I could tell you what a fine cabin you're putting up, Dan. I could tell you that Hap Wilsey had made a strike up on the Little Musk-Ox. But you'd know that isn't what we're

here for. So we'll get down to business."

Burkett nodded.

"I can't understand it, Dan," continued Farrar. "You've done it so many times in the past. It's been your life for I don't know how many years. I just can't understand it."

That was it, thought Burkett. No one could understand. Only he knew it, down in the recesses of his heart, knew it in a cold, clammy, fearful way. To him, it was understandable, but it was a mute knowledge. He just couldn't find the words that would let others see it the way he saw it.

He said it the way he'd said it several times before. "I'm through with that kind of life, John. I've put aside my gun for good. I just don't want to get back into it again."

Harry Axtell had shifted his hands to his hip pockets. "We're not asking that you become our permanent peace officer," he said. "We already have Bud Hubbard. It would only be for a few days, Dan. Hubbard can handle routine matters. It's just that he can't cope with Boomer Ferguson and his crowd. Ferguson is the key to it all. Run him out of Kiskiyou and the hangers-on will follow. Ferguson won't run from Bud Hubbard but he'll run from you."

Burkett swallowed a sigh. There was no use saying anything further. They couldn't look at it the way he did. They didn't think to pause and look inside him and see the gnawing fear that plagued him. Not fear of the danger; that was something alien to Burkett. Such a fear they might comprehend but not this other strange, compelling fright.

Farrar took it up again. "Look, Dan. You're settling down here. Before long, you'll be married. What kind of town do you want to live in? This town has no room for Ferguson and his kind. They're the scum that plague every frontier settlement. They've got to go before anything good and clean and decent can come from

here. The families have moved in. They want a town that's free of gamblers and killers and painted women. Don't you want a town like that, Dan?"

Burkett said nothing. His heart was heavy with sympathy for them, but there was no other way for him.

"I'm sorry, John," he said finally. "I'm awfully sorry. . . ."

AFTER they had gone, Burkett turned from his half-finished cabin back up the slope to town. He intended calling on Lucy Carstairs this night as he called every night. He had considered himself fortunate in meeting her this late in life—in his early forties. His shoulders were broad and straight and the litheness was still in his every move, but wisps of gray were beginning to tinge his temples.

Lucy was ten years his junior. She took in laundry and did sewing and mending for the miners and trappers. She was a good woman who would give him no regrets.

It would be a tremendous change for him, this settling down in one place to stay the rest of his life. He had run away from his farm home in Illinois when he was sixteen and had lived the vagabond life. The lure of new, fresh places had called to him and he had never stayed in any one place too long. He'd helped drive a pack train to Santa Fe and had hunted the buffalo. He'd prospected for silver in the Colorado highlands and driven a stagecoach, and then one day in Ellsworth he had faced down a gunman named Ben Thompson. That had been the beginning.

An endless parade of marshal's badges graced his shirts. Ellsworth and Caldwell and Dodge, the roaring days in old Tombstone in Arizona and the silver and gold camps of Nevada. He'd brought law and order to countless towns and when it was all done he'd packed his things and moved on.

Moved on until he had witnessed the

death of the frontier West. Barbed wire dissected the great open ranges, and the roaring boom towns were a thing of the past. Then gold was discovered up in Alaska, opening a vast new wilderness to the avid, eager eyes of the restless men, and because that was the only thing he knew, Dan Burkett trailed north. There he met Lucy Carstairs. . . .

The lights of the town were on Burkett. They came spilling softly out of the windows, laying their pattern on the dirt street. Ahead he could see the garish sign of Boomer Ferguson's Polar Bar. Burkett's blood began to quicken.

The quiet of the night was broken by the sounds from the Polar Bar, shattering the stillness, and falling on Burkett's ears like balm. Someone was thumping a piano that sounded tinny and out of tune. There were singing voices and laughing voices and cursing voices. It was the frontier again, as he'd known it back in Dodge and Tombstone.

Burkett paused in front of the Polar Bar. He stood there with his eyes half-closed, savoring the sound of it in his heart. This was the fear in him—the fear of the awful emptiness in him when the rootless, homeless horde should move on. This was his last link with the old days. He could come down here of an evening and lose himself again in the past. It made the dull, slow days bearable.

Burkett had started for the door when it opened suddenly, lamplight splashing Burkett, silhouetting him tall and tense against the darkness. He paused there as the two men emerged, stumbling and struggling.

The big man's struggles were dull with the stupor of too much drinking. He was making pawing, fumbling motions with his hands, striving to shield his head from the blows.

The little man possessed the quick, startling movements of an attacking puma. He was all over the bigger fellow, his gun

barrel striking sickening blows on the man's skull. Unbridled fury contorted the shorter man's face, made small, animal sounds in his throat.

BURKETT halted, a sudden, cold anger stirring in him. The big fellow was all done for. He no longer had the strength to lift his hands above his head. They hung weakly at his sides, fingers twitching convulsively at every blow. Blood matted his face, almost obliterating his features, but Burkett saw through the crimson and with his recognition, hot anger burst in his brain.

Leaping forward, Burkett closed steel fingers about the smaller man's shoulders, tore him away as the big fellow fell on his face.

"That's enough, Sanders, that's enough," growled Burkett.

A curse screaming through his lips, Sanders whirled, gun poised. An insane pleasure flowed through Burkett. He closed in swiftly, blocking the blow with his left shoulder, his right elbow coming up hard and cracking against Sanders' chin. The fellow's curse changed to a howl of pain. He went stumbling to the ground.

Sanders reached quickly for his fallen weapon. But Burkett had jumped forward, towering above the other. Burkett's boot lifted, poised for a kick into the sitting man's stomach.

"Go on, Sanders," said Burkett, voice trembling with rage. "Go ahead and try it."

Sanders' face turned sick in the lamplight that covered him. The heat died in his eyes and his thin, narrow mouth began to twitch. Carefully, he took his hand away.

"You ain't heeled, Burkett," said Sanders, not quite able to keep the fright out of his tone. "I won't pull on a man that ain't heeled."

Burkett threw a scornful, derisive laugh

at him. Sanders flushed and his mouth moved to say more, but only a strangled sound came. Angrily he pushed himself to his feet, turned his back on Burkett, and began elbowing his way through the crowd that had gathered.

There were several men ringed around the fallen man.

"He sure got it good," said one of them.

"The man's hurt bad," said another. "He needs a doctor quick."

Four of them lifted the unconscious man and carried him off. Burkett watched until the night swallowed them. Then he turned into the Polar Bar.

He ordered a beer and stood with his elbows digging into the bar, hearing the sound all around him—the jovial hum of voices, the vagrant snatches of song, the soft, delicate clicking of the chips from the faro layout and poker tables in the back of the place. But there was that other thing uppermost in Burkett's mind—the raw picture of Pete Ryan's battered, bloodied body lying on the ground.

It wasn't that this was anything new to Burkett but Pete Ryan was the kind of man that Burkett was trying to be. Ryan had a wife and five kids. He had roots. He was like Farrar and Harry Axtell, the kind that stayed behind when the restless, homeless men shoved on.

There was an almost imperceptible softening of the saloon sounds about him. It broke upon Burkett's reverie and he raised his head to see the cause of it.

A man had come into the Polar Bar, a big, florid man with red jowls and a paunch. The golden lamplight glittered softly on the silver marshal's badge on his shirt front. This was Bud Hubbard, marshal of Kiskiyou.

He moved slowly forward, brown eyes staring above the heads of the crowd. The sounds stilled even more and now the clacking of the poker chips in the rear was a harsh, grating noise. A man came from the rear, striding with firm, delib-

erate steps toward the town marshal.

THIS man was tall. His hair held the color and sheen of coal black oil and the thin, well-trimmed black mustache accentuated the paleness of his features. The well-shaped mouth and a deep cleft in his chin, along with his large, black eyes and long sideburns made him a very handsome man. His black, cutaway coat fitted his slim shoulders with tailored perfection and across his gaudy, flowered vest glittered a gold watch chain. This was Boomer Ferguson.

Hubbard halted at the sight of Ferguson who cut over toward the bar, waiting insolently for Hubbard to come to him.

The marshal did not like this. His face flushed still more but he approached Ferguson. "Where's Sanders?" he demanded.

Ferguson leaned an elbow indolently on the bar. "Am I supposed to be his keeper? How should I know?"

Hubbard's face was almost purple. "Sanders works for you. Where are you hiding him, Ferguson?"

"Why don't you look around?" asked Ferguson insolently. "It's what you're paid for, isn't it?"

Sweat drenched Hubbard's face. For a moment pity cut through the contempt in Burkett's heart. Hubbard was trying but he just didn't have the guts.

"It's about Ryan," said Hubbard, half-lamely, and Burkett felt a coldness squeeze his heart. "He's dead."

"So what?" said Ferguson. "He asked for it. He got drunk and started giving us all a bad time. He said the faro layout was fixed. He said the bartenders were shortchanging him and that one of the girls lifted his poke. When we cut the drinks off him and told him to go home, he got violent. Sanders had no choice."

Hubbard tried again. "Ryan was unarmed. Sanders had no call to whip him like that."

Ferguson's lip curled. "After all, Ryan was the bigger man. Sanders had to have something to equalize the odds. If Ryan had been reasonable, Sanders wouldn't have had to use force."

"All right," said Hubbard, drawing himself up, trying to bluster his way out of it. "I'll let it ride this time, but don't let it happen again. Another time I'm gonna crack down, by God, Ferguson, and you'll be sorry."

Ferguson smiled mockingly. "Sure, Marshal. Whatever you say, Marshal."

The flavor was gone from his beer and Burkett left it half-finished on the bar and walked out. Outside he paused a moment, watching the play of the aurora borealis across the northern sky, troubled thoughts starting to torment him again.

He struck off down the street at a slow walk, head bowed in thought, and he almost ran into Farrar.

"Thank God I've found you, Dan," said Farrar.

He was breathing hard as if he'd been running. Burkett took in the taut excitement in the man's face and an icy premonition tickled the back of Burkett's neck.

Farrar reached out a hand, grasping Burkett's arm, fingers digging in urgently. "I'm trying once more, Dan. Harry and the others said it was no use but I've got to try once more. They're through taking it, Dan. They're striking back."

BECAUSE it was there already in his mind, torturing him with its insistence, a ragged irritation flowed through Burkett. He was beginning to understand how it stood with him, how it would always stand with him, and with all his heart he didn't want it that way.

"Make sense, John," he said shortly.

Farrar drew a deep breath. "Harry's called a meeting to organize a vigilance committee. He's a hothead. He'll get more hotheads to back him and then they'll

head for Ferguson and Sanders and all that filthy scum. But that isn't the way, Dan. Vigilantes have a way of getting out of hand. There's no telling where they'll stop and draw the line. Won't you give it a try, Dan?"

They came storming through Burkett's mind now, all the doubts, all the nagging fears. Everything in him cried out against it but the fear kept him chained.

"All that it will take is one word from you, Dan," Farrar was trying again. "Deep down inside they're all yellow. I heard how Sanders quit cold on you to-night even though he had a gun and you were unarmed. They'll heed you, Dan. You're the only one here that can save a lot of useless bloodshed. Say you'll do it, Dan."

Mingled with the fear in Burkett was a sudden anger at himself, at the weakness against which he was so powerless. There was a slight, barely perceptible tremble in his voice. As always, he knew what he had to do.

"All right, John," he said.

Farrar's breath tore out of him in a relieved gasp. "Thanks, Dan. You don't know what this means to us. I'll go tell Harry and the boys and we'll swear you in as deputy."

Burkett's voice was heavy. "I want to go and tell Lucy first. Then I'll be along. . . ."

He had had all the right words framed in his mind, but when the telling of it came it was a jumbled, incoherent mess. He tried to get it out, tried so hard that little beads of sweat broke out on his brow, but the words just wouldn't come.

Lucy Carstairs listened with her head inclined a little, seemingly intent on her sewing. She had a rather plain face that was smoothly round and marked by large, gentle brown eyes.

When Burkett got to the nagging fears roiling inside him, he could go no further. To him it had always been clear enough

but could she understand? Could anyone understand? he wondered.

"So I thought I'd come and tell you, Lucy," he finished. "I wanted you to know and have your consent."

She smiled gently. "Of course you have my consent, Dan. It's something that has to be done. It should have been done long ago."

He wanted it out of him so badly he tried again. "You don't understand, Lucy. It's more than that. I'm trying to tell you how it is. I—I don't want to do it. I quit that sort of thing and I don't want to go back to it."

Her head lifted, face sober and querying. "If it's because of me, you needn't worry, Dan. I know you meant it when you promised you'd quit the old ways and settle down. I know this is different."

"They kept nagging me," continued Burkett huskily. "They wouldn't let me alone. It was nag, nag, nag until they broke me down even though I didn't want to break down."

"It's all right, Dan," she said simply.

"Then you really don't mind?" he asked, feeling the weight of it still pressing down on him.

"Mind?" she asked, a soft smile on her lips. "I'm proud, Dan. I'm proud that they turned to you as the one man who could help them."

MAYBE it wouldn't be so bad after all, he told himself after he left Lucy. Maybe after they'd been driven away and the last link had been broken, he could forget. He'd have his home and Lucy and perhaps he could settle down. . . .

He went to his boarding house and dug down into his pack for his .44 Starr army revolver. He checked it over carefully, loading the cylinder, and buckling the old, worn shell belt and holster about his waist.

He made short work of being sworn in. Pinning a deputy's badge to his shirt, he left them immediately, spurning their

offers to back him up with armed force.

The night seemed chill to Burkett. The stars looked cold and close overhead and the aurora borealis was a brilliant, weaving display across the heavens. The heavy, filled holster knocked softly against his thigh as he walked along, and it brought all the old feelings back to him, doubly strong now after such a long denial. He felt a quickening in his blood and a surging buoyancy in his walk.

The sounds from the Polar Bar came drifting down the street to him. They were fuller now, with an urgent, savage, restless undertone to them. He came to the Polar Bar and was across the street when he noticed the man in the shadows. The glow of the man's cigarette gave him away, flaring and fading with a faint regularity like the slow, dull beatings of a dying heart.

Burkett halted, digging his heels into the dirt of the street. His voice held none of his tight, pent-up feelings.

"Hello, Ferguson."

Ferguson did not answer right away. Burkett could feel the speculative weight of his eyes. After a long pause, Ferguson let out his breath in a sigh and dropped his cigarette.

"It is true," he said at length. "They said you were taking a badge again but I didn't believe it. I was sure you had put all that behind you but now the badge is there on your shirt and I guess you mean it all right. What made you change, Burkett?"

"Pete Ryan was my friend."

Ferguson's laugh held a soft, mocking edge. The shadows blanketed him. Burkett could see only the pale blot made by the man's face and vague outlines of his body.

"You've never been a sentimentalist, Burkett," said Ferguson. "It goes deeper than that. You just couldn't stay away from it. Isn't that it? Ryan is just a handy alibi. You couldn't stay away from

it any more than I could settle down and stop running a joint. Is that how it is with you, Burkett?"

A faint irritation began stirring in Burkett. He didn't like having it brought out like this. He said gruffly, "I didn't come to pass the time of day, Ferguson."

"No," admitted Ferguson, "I don't think you did. But before we go off half-cocked, couldn't we talk it over?"

"I've never made deals with your kind, Ferguson."

Ferguson sighed. "I know you haven't. Still I thought that now that you're getting on in years, maybe you could see it differently. You're mature now, Burkett. Things like this have to be, and averting your eyes now and then is quite a prudent thing to do."

Burkett shook his head. "I've never been bought, Ferguson, and I'm afraid I'm too old to change my ways."

The weight of Ferguson's eyes intensified. "No, I don't think you'll ever change. Well, what did you want with me then?"

"You ought to know. You've been run out of other towns."

"A man gets tired of running," said Ferguson, and something primal flared in his tone. "A man gets tired of being pushed around. It'll come to that sooner or later so it might as well be now."

Ferguson had been doing something with his left hand and suddenly, a match glared into flame in his fingers. The impact of it hit Burkett hard, darting across his brain, and even as the truth unfolded for him he was twisting, ducking, hand driving for the butt of his .44 Starr.

This would be Ferguson's way and Burkett cursed his carelessness for overlooking it. The pattern of it had been evident enough. Ferguson waiting in the shadows, biding his time in that gulping darkness—the darkness that might conceal a back-shooting killer like Sanders.

Even as the thought was bursting in his mind, a rift split the solid wall of blackness, driving an orange flame at him. He heard the whistle of the slug past him. The .44 Starr was in his hand and he had the burst of gunflame to guide his bullets. He laid down two rapid shots.

An animal-like scream hit his ears, blending harshly with the echoes of gunfire, but Burkett could follow it no further than that. There was still the menace of Ferguson behind him. Burkett whirled, the hammer of his gun eared back.

Ferguson's hand was coming out from beneath his left armpit.

Burkett fired once. . . .

He checked Sanders first and found him dead. Returning to the front of the Polar Bar carrying Ferguson, he pushed through the throng that had gathered and dropped on his knees beside the gambler.

The man was dying. A waxlike pallor lay over his features and his breath came in laboring gasps. Burkett watched him and as he stared a strange pity he couldn't quite understand came over him.

"I'm sorry, Boomer," said Burkett. "I've destroyed your world, at the same time destroying mine. I've always done that. I've always helped destroy the only way of life I know."

"You're a queer one," said Ferguson with his last breath. "I could never make you out before. But now I think I understand. . . ."

BURKETT had given them—the restless, ruthless, rootless ones—their ultimatum and now, the next morning, he sat up on a knoll, watching their exodus from Kiskiyou.

As Burkett watched, he felt the frightening emptiness descend on him. He knew a moment of panic, of a wild, indefinable fear that clogged his throat, and as the sweat broke out on his brow he realized the truth.

He had thought that he could endure it but now he knew sadly that it wasn't so. He felt the pull again, the pull of those invisible horizons.

That evening, as he walked through the town, he sensed that something was missing. He thought a while and then he knew that what was lacking was the sound of the wild revelry from the Polar Bar.

His decision was made. Back at his boarding house, Burkett prepared a light pack which he slung over his shoulders. He went out into the night and walked to where Lucy Carstairs lived.

"I'm leaving, Lucy," he told her. "It's what I was afraid of last night. You see, I don't fit in here any more. I get scared whenever I stop and look into the future. It's a life I don't know how to live."

She shrugged and smiled a little. "It's up to you, Dan."

He wanted very much to make her see it the way he saw it but still the words just stumbled around in his mind. "I tried to tell you," he repeated defensively. "Do you understand, Lucy?"

"I understand your kind," she said.

"I'd ask you to go along," he said, "but it's an endless trail I'm following. I'll never stay fixed any place long. I wouldn't make you very happy and knowing that, and knowing that it was my weakness making it like that, I'd come to blame you for it and maybe even hate you. I wouldn't want things to work out like that, Lucy."

There was much more to say, all the regrets and sadness inside him, but the saying of it was beyond his capacity.

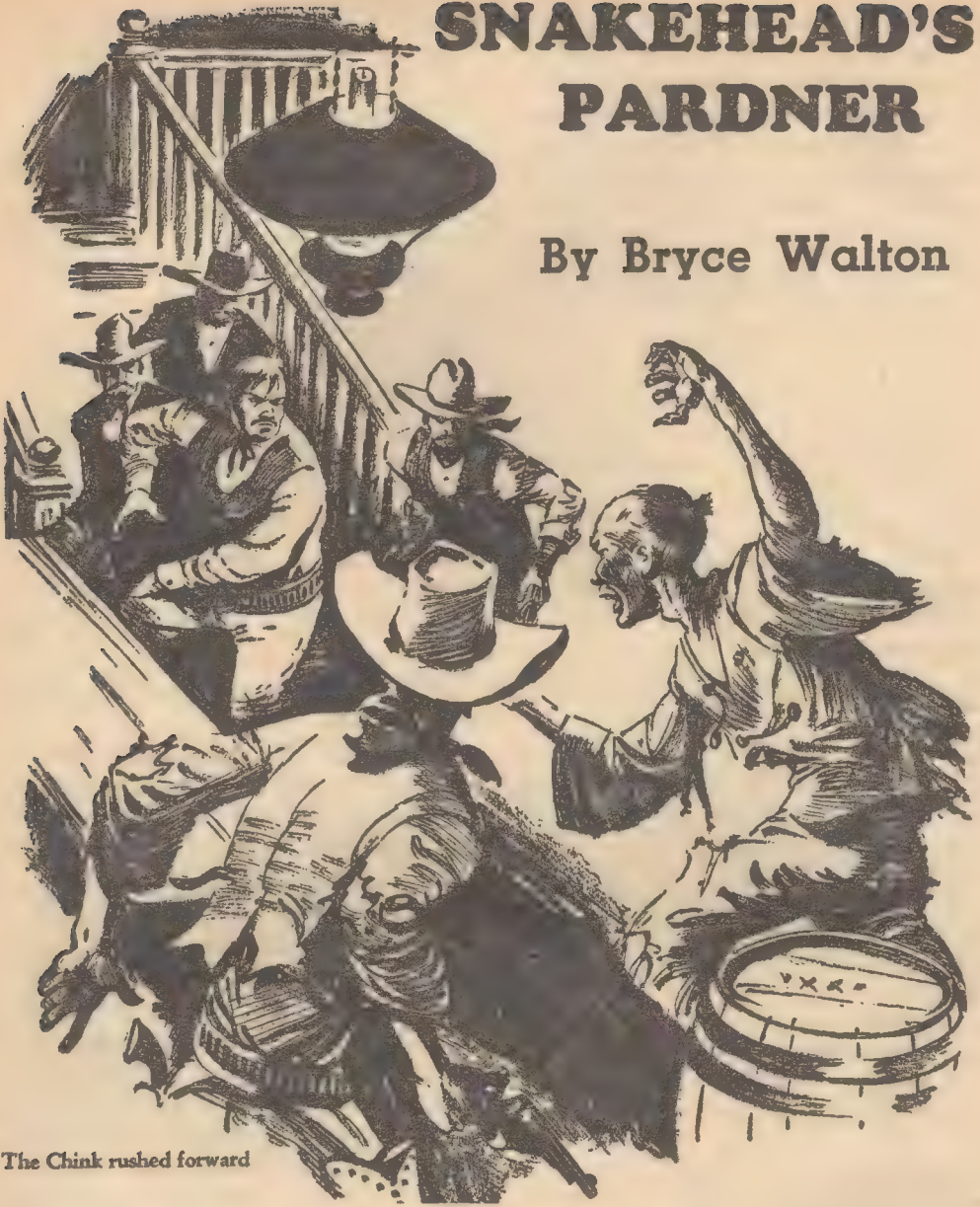
"Goodbye, Lucy," he said.

"Goodbye, Dan."

Then he was off, his pack on his back, stepping along with long, swift strides. He felt an urge to turn and look back but a certain pride held him from doing so. He kept his eyes ahead. To the north the aurora borealis had begun to play.

Snakehead's Pardner

By Bryce Walton



The Chink rushed forward

The night he dragged his scarred and broken body back to Hell Town, Snakehead Burke had a pardner with him—starved, bloodied and only half-alive. They rode the same horse, bore the same shameful brand, and the same bright crimson blood would flow at their redemption.

THE MAN and the taffy-colored palomino were part of the night and the loneliness of the wind rustling the bunch grass. They blended with the long sandstone shadows, and with the butte and mesa dimly outlined by the rising moon.

He was tall, thin, in faded levis and sweat-stained shirt that hung loosely on

his bony shoulders. His hands were big looking and claw-like at the ends of bony wrists. He slouched in the saddle, his expressionless eyes staring at the distant lights of the gold-rush settlement called Hell Town, the town he'd been run out of six months ago. He'd ridden facing the wrong end of a mule, his face ripped and swollen from pistol-whipping, his body groaning from the rawhiding and clubbing, and red shame burning deep down in his heart.

"Don't ever come sneakin' into Hell Town agin' Snakehead," Big Red McWilliams had warned. "'Cause the next time you won't ride out of town. Not even on a mule."

McWilliams owned Hell Town, unofficially. Officially he ran the Bull Whack Saloon. Several gunmen had been interested in the salaries offered for being marshal. Some had left town the next day, in a hurry; others had ended up in Boot-hill. And after that no one seemed at all interested in the job and Big Red had pretty much his own way. Gold bullion from the Alder Gulch placer mines was stolen from the stagecoaches. A few trail drovers who had brought beef all the way from Texas for hungry miners, sold their herds for a big profit and were promptly relieved of their pile, and found either slugged or killed in the shadows of Hell Town. Everyone knew that Big Red's Bull Whack bunch were responsible, but no one had the guts to try anything.

Snakehead Burke sat in the shadows, and, watching the lights of Hell Town, listening to the din of its fun, remembered. Since his Dad had been dry-gulched long ago by big cattlemen for running some sheep on free grazing land, Burke had followed the owlhoot. First he had taken the trail for revenge, but long after his sixguns had accounted for the last responsible cowman, he was still riding down that rocky road. His hair was thin now, turning gray. In his early forties, he knew

he'd never get off the owlhoot now. A year ago he had ridden into Hell Town and hired out to Big Red as a gunsel.

Snakehead had never objected to shooting a man. But he was dead against dry-gulching, and he had always given a man a fighting chance. When he had refused to take part in a dry-gulch plan involving a couple of old miners, Big Red and his Bull Whackers had jumped him. Two had gotten him from behind before he could draw. They'd pistol-whipped him, rawhided him, dragged him in the dust, and had ridden him out of town backwards on a scurvy mule. He'd been beaten up so badly that here it was, six months later, before he was able to ride back to get Big Red. And there was still a slight nervousness to his hands he'd never had before.

But he guessed maybe that was caused by the realization that he'd never get out of Hell Town if he rode in tonight and got Big Red. If he did, it would be luck, and Snakehead never believed in luck—only quick drawing and fast shooting. Just so he got Big Red, that was all he cared about.

They'd began calling him Snakehead, not because of any peculiar shape of his head, but because of his eyes. They darkened now, as he remembered, reflecting that the mind behind them was as cold and bright as a rattlesnake's.

He loosened the sixes in their holsters, was just starting down the narrow trail into Hell Town, when the palomino shied, raising its head in a sudden snorting alarm.

Snakehead's hand found a gun in it, a result of that instinctive movement which even he could no longer understand. He peered into the shadows. And then he heard the low bubbling groan.

He neck-reined the horse around, rode up a draw. The moon shown on turning bunch grass, hock-high and rich; made rapier-thin shadows from chaparral and yucca trickling into the draw.

A yellow claw, like a huge bird's, reached up. A lemon-yellow face with slanting black eyes that were hot and dark with pain, looked up helplessly into Snakehead's face.

The man looked like a skeleton stretched over with yellow parchment. Snakehead felt sudden sweat on his forehead as he looked at the man. He moistened his lips. The Chink had been beaten to a pulp.

He climbed out of the saddle, squatted down to hold a canteen of water to the Chinaman's bared teeth. The claw-like hand pushed it away. Hot feverish eyes stared unblinking into Snakehead's eyes.

"What happened to you, Chineeb-boy?" Snakehead asked slowly.

Snakehead helped the tall Chinaman to his feet. His clothes hung in bloody tatters, his bony body was ribboned with welts and slashes and bruises. A piece of scalp hung over his ear. He stood there, shivering with pain. But somehow his eyes remained free of pain. They were hardened by a blazing hatred that sent a shiver down Snakehead's spine.

He listened to the Chink's story. He spoke English fairly well for a Chink, but sometimes his high voice slipped off into gibberish. There were a lot of Chinks in Alder Gulch. The Irishmen had built the railroads from the East, the Chinese from the West. They followed the gold rushes before that, as laundry operators, laborers. Every settlement had its Chineetown—a realm of mystery peopled by strangely silent yellow men whose customs the cowmen and miners couldn't understand, and therefore ridiculed. Sometimes the ridicule became contempt, or worse. Now and then a few Chinese attempted to make themselves a stake by mining gold. They didn't live long.

The Chink Snakehead was supporting to keep him from falling on his face was such a Chinaman. A bunch of them had

found a rich hidden placer field above Hell Town. Painfully, with the crudest methods, they had panned there for a year. They had extracted more gold than Big Red had considered it right for a Chink to have.

These Chinks had fought for their gold, but with only knives against Winchesters and six-shooters, ten of them were massacred. And as an example to the other Chinese in town, Big Red had beat Wong Kee unmercifully, hung him up by the thumbs, then ridden him out of town on a rail. They had dumped him in the rocks, in the blazing sun, without food or water. Without a "Chinaman's chance."

"You an' me's in the same corral, Chineeb-boy," said Snakehead. "But Big Red gave me a better break—he at least gave me a mule." His thin lips twisted. Ugly lines ran down his cheeks, and his eyes darkened. "I guess maybe you an' me's got a lot in common tonight, Chineeb-boy. An' I reckon it's not nearly so bad to have a yella skin as to have a yella belly and red hair on it. The question is, Wong Kee, whut we gonna do 'bout it?"

The Chink spoke softly, words coming out painfully from his battered mouth.

"Wong Kee always been well-mannered as decreed by thousand rituals. I have sworn oath by Joss of Ch'i Liang. I have wait for strength to go back into that town . . ."

His words choked off, drowned with weakness, hate and bitterness. "But too weak . . . I die . . . die with shame . . ."

Snakehead shook him. "Maybe it ain't time to cash in yore chips yet, Chineeb-boy. I got a score with Big Red too."

The Chink didn't seem to hear. He pointed at his bleeding scalp. And then Snakehead noticed that his hair had been clipped short, that his pigtail was cut off.

"My queue," Wong Kee's voice trembled. "It white-touched, it braided in five plaits of custom. Big Red . . . they beat me, drag me in dust, so my ancestors

cried out from graves of shame. But I stand this thing . . . I even die in peace maybe . . . but Big Red cut off queue. It was long. It reached to ground when unbraided."

Snakehead stared. He knew very little of the Chink's queer ideas. But he knew how much their pigtails meant to them. He'd known an owlhooter once who had broke down and cried when he thought he'd lost his rabbit's foot. But a pigtail meant more, he guessed. Something about honor.

"Yo're a funny one, Chinee-boy," he said. "Don't care for nothin' exceptin' that there pigtail. But then, I reckon Big Red sort a' stole my pigtail too, when 'e rode me out a' town on that mule back'ards."

Wong Kee raised to his full height. He was tall, Snakehead saw, for a Chink. Probably one of those thin North China ones, with skin almost lemon-yellow. His hands were long and tapering, and his eyes were slitted, and shiny as obsidian.

He spoke again, almost to himself. His voice trembled with shame and hatred. He held out his bloody hands. "I find here shame, I find dishonor. My tears fall like rain. But before I die I would avenge that honor . . . I swore at the Joss of Ch'i Liang to avenge the House of Kee. An oath I can not keep . . ."

SNAKEHEAD BURKE gripped the bony wrist. "Snap out of it, Chinee-boy. I'm goin' into Hell Town. Red McWilliams an' me has a hand to play out tonight. If you want a sit in on the game, yo're welcome."

Wong Kee shivered all over like he was cold. "They laugh . . . they wave queue in the air like whip . . . they run me round and round . . . Big Red beat me as I hang by thumbs in the sun . . . he run all Chinese out of Hell Town. He say no yella Chink ever come back, that he kill any Chink he find in Hell Town."

Snakehead grinned thinly. "No white man's town'd let Red McWilliams in it either. But he gave me the same warnin'. So I reckon as how it'd be sorta' right fer you an' me to ride back into Hell Town together, Chinee-boy. Come on!"

The Chink groaned a little as Snakehead helped up in back of the saddle. But he never made a sound as the palomino started down the narrow trail into Hell Town. They rode into the two blocks of false-fronts and sod huts, the Chink clutching weakly to Snakehead's lean hips, his slitted eyes looking hungrily at the oil-light seeping into the street from the saloons.

As Snakehead went through the batwing doors into Big Red's Bull Whack Saloon, Wong Kee was behind him, like a nameless shadow. He walked quickly to the end of the bar, so he could see the door and the stairs going up to Big Red's rooms on the second floor.

It was just like any other saloon, a bar along one side, tables on the other. Men were playing poker at the tables, a few standing at the bar. The silence that descended over the room when Snakehead walked in, however, was unusual.

Someone broke the silence. "Hey, it's that mule-ridin' Snakehead!"

A man stood up at one of the tables, a big, grinning man with a thick beard. His smile died and one hand clawed for his gun, jerking it from its holster. The gun was half lifted, and then Snakehead's hand had one of his six-shooters in it. There was only one shot. Snakehead's. The big bearded man backed up with the big hole just below his throat. He was choking as he fell on the table, then rolled onto the floor.

Snakehead's other gun slid free. "You blacklegs vamoose oughtta here, all a' yeh. I'll gut-shoot any jasper that's aroun' here after I counts to ten. An' I ain't even sure I can count thet high."

He fired again. There was a mad scram-

bling for the bat-wings. Several went out through the windows, the first out taking glass and frame along. The barkeep, a thin-shouldered, shriveled man with a bald head and a nose like a bird's beak, started around the bar.

"Not you, pearl-diver," grunted Snakehead. One pistol barrel whipped around savagely. The barkeep stumbled back, wiping blood from his eyes.

"Now," said Snakehead, "we want a little service. The Chink 'ere an' me, we want whiskey. An' no hogwash. The best yeh got, mister."

The little barkeep's face was corpse gray. A thin sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead above the bleeding gash. He licked his lips and stood there, shaking. He was staring at the Chinaman.

He stared, but he wasn't reaching for bottle or glasses.

"Whut's eatin' you, Snakehead?" quavered the barkeep. "No Chink's allowed in 'ere! Big Red said—"

"Big Red owns this saloon," said Snakehead, "an' he ain't no more of a white man than a pie-eyed skunk. Furthermore, I ain't askin' you for that whiskey agin. Me an' the Chink's thirsty."

The little bald man mopped blood from his eye. He put two wet hands on the top of the bar. "L-listen now, Snakehead. Big Red, he don't like you none. But me, I don't know nothin' about you. But I don't serve no Chink when—"

He cried out suddenly. His fingers curled. One hand reached down slowly, then stiffened as he sank to his knees. His eyes glazed slowly as the other hand clutched his chest. He sprawled out nosily among bottles and broken glass.

Snakehead raised the two smoking guns. His eyes were shiny and black, like polished beads, as they darted around the saloon to the doors up the stairs where Red and his gunnies hung out. He glanced at the Chink.

Wong Kee still stood there, supporting

himself against the bar, his face expressionless.

"We ain't got a friend in the world, Chineese-boy," grinned Snakehead thinly. "We can't even get ourselves a drink a' whiskey when we're thirsty."

The Chink's skull-like face twisted. "That no make a difference now. We die soon."

"But we're gettin' that drink fust," said Snakehead.

The Chink shrugged. "So be." But his glance moved to the stairs. Snakehead spun as he heard the clump of boots on the stairs.

FIVE MEN stood on the stairs, looking across the room. A blue-bottle fly buzzed through the smoky air.

McWilliams had thinning red hair, a blunt calloused jaw, and a fearless aggressiveness apparent in his brusque voice, his swinging stride, the cocky angle of his stetson. He was big and solidly built. He might have been handsome, too, but for his eyes. They weren't simply expressionless, Snakehead thought, they were dead.

His voice boomed. "Yo're not goin out of here standin' up, Snakehead."

"Thet don't worry me none, Red," Snakehead called back. "You rid me out a' here on a mule facin' back'ards. There ain't no blackleg can do that to me. Yo're not big enough Red."

The three gunnies stood with hands hugging their gun butts. Snakehead watched them out of the corner of his eye. Red came on down the stairs and took a couple of strides toward Snakehead, and stopped.

He grinned at the Chink. "Fer a minute I didn't know which one was which, Snakehead."

The gunnies on the stairs guffawed. Snakehead noticed the double loop of human hair, braided, that Big Red was using for a watch fob. It was Wong Kee's pig-

tail. He heard the Chink's breath suck in between his smashed teeth.

"This 'ere Chineese's a whiter man than you'll ever be, Red. Even if you live longer'n I plan for you to. You an' your bunch never faced a gun square. Them two jaspers on the stair held me while you gave me the pistol-treatment. The Chink here's got more guts and honor than thet."

The Chink let out a small sharp cry, like a wounded animal. He started past Snakehead. Big Red swore, his hands streaking for his guns. The gunnies on the stairs opened fire, and Snakehead's guns got hot as he went down on one knee.

Big Red yelled hoarsely as the .45 was slammed out of his torn hand. He stumbled sidewise as his other shoulder was ripped by a second slug. Weaponless he careened toward the bar, his face a mask of gray putty.

The first two gunmen on the stairs went down in one heap. The third tried to retreat up the stairs but got tangled up with the fourth who was trying to run down. One screamed as he died with a bullet in his throat. The other fell over the side of the stairs groaning, his boot heels beating a tattoo on the sawdust floor.

Snakehead slowly pulled himself back up to a standing position and stood leaning against the bar. His left hand wasn't any good anymore. It just swung at his side. Blood dripped from the end of it onto the floor. But he didn't feel any pain. He didn't even try to figure out where he was hit.

He stood there looking at Big Red who was leaning on the other end of the bar. Big Red was afraid, Snakehead saw that. Sweat trickled down his cheeks, his eyes moved around the walls. Then he looked back at Snakehead, blinked, wet his lips carefully.

"Listen, Snakehead," he croaked. "I got men outside. I got 'em all over town. You ain't got a chance, not unless you bow oughtta here now. Do thet, an' I'll give yuh a free start."

Snakehead laughed. He felt bone-dead weary. He wanted to lay down in the sawdust and stretch out. "I didn't come in here with any idee a' riding' out agin, Red. Now yeh listen to me. Git back there behind thet bar an' rustle the Chink 'ere an' me some whiskey. The best yuh got, Red."

(Continued on page 129)

**STOP, OR
I'LL SCREAM!**

**NOT NECESSARY,
DEAR. I USE NEW
STAR BLADES!**



4 for 10¢
also 25¢ pack
STAR SELECTED



Pike Shuntlee fired five
times. . . .



COWS AND SHEEP DON'T MIX!

CHAPTER ONE

Death on the Rimrock

PIKE SHUNTLEE was never more cool and sober in his life as he crouched behind the bole of the old oak among the pines on the east rim, the rising morning sun behind him, his gray eyes watching a break in the canyon wall. He had everything in his favor. As undersheriff of Buffalo Bow, Montana, he had been sent here—as good as sent here, at least, though he was actually more than a mile from where he rightfully belonged at the moment. Lean and gray old Buck

Smashing
Range-War
Novel

By Tom Roan

Unless Sheriff Buck Heeney twisted five brass shells and a couple of horseshoe nails into a hangnoose for his trustd deputy's neck, the raging, red blood-fire of war would destroy Gray Grizzly Basin . . . Providing neither of the sheriff's life-long friends gut-shot him first!

Hansen and the sheriff
opened up



Heeney, sheriff of Buffalo Bow for close to forty years had ordered him to hit the hills north of town well before dawn, to get his business done and get back to town. The business had been done, thoroughly, completely.

Now, at last, he had the chance for which he had waited nearly a month. A smart man always waited, especially when it was left up to him to start the damndest cow and sheep war that ever took place.

His rifle was ready, long and powerful enough to kill a man at a mile away. He had already scattered five empty cartridge shells to his right on the pine needles—shells his rifle would never chamber. The ones that would come from his gun would be caught one at a time as he ejected them after opening fire. Those would go in his pocket and be carried away, leaving no possible chance for any man to suspect him.

An under-sheriff working under old Buck Heeney simply had to learn things; and for nearly four years Pike Shuntlee had worked hard, religiously carrying out every order. Buck Heeney liked him, wanted him to know the business from the bottom up so that he would be able to take over the sheriff's office eventually.

Pike Shuntlee had been big, sloppy and careless when he slumped into Buffalo Bow one Saturday afternoon on a rack-of-bone bay and a rag of a saddle somebody had thrown away. Jules Gant, owner of the Standing Wall Cafe had hired him as a swamper and a flunkey—at just about enough to eat on and get a place to sleep in the saddle room of the public stables across the street. Buck Heeney had used him a lot of times to clean up the jail at the head of the street, and Heeney had taken a liking to him. Later there had been the Widow Smith, who ran the boarding house east of the old stone jail, who hired him, giving him more to eat and a better place to sleep. And like a man climbing a ladder, rung by rung, Pike

Shuntlee had come up, Martha pushing him until she was ready to marry him. He was dressed in well-fitting clothes now; the six-shooters at his hips—like the fine rifle—were the best money could buy.

Now he tensed and the flat-gray eyes became hard. The rifle slid forward, around the right side of the tree. His long legs and body slid backward at the same time, belly and chest flattening on the ground. He could shoot better like this, with both elbows propped firmly on the ground. Especially from beside a tree against which he could brace the rifle.

A man rode into view on a beautiful yellow mare with a silver mane and tail, a tall young man in black, with a silver-plated Colt at his right side and a rifle on his saddle. As he pulled up and looked down the canyon, Pike Shuntlee drew a bead on the hips of the mare. Six other riders appeared.

His finger closed on the trigger and a spurt of smokeless flame lanced from the rifle's muzzle. A yell of alarm came from the distance.

Now the mare was trying to rear, bawling frantically. Her forefeet failed to rise. She went backward instead, as if suddenly ham-strung by an unseen wolf. Her rump hit the ground. For a few seconds she was like a sitting dog, as the man in black leaped from the saddle. Still bawling frantically, the mare reeled over on her side.

The rifle cracked and crashed again. This time the bead was on a man, a long, red-nosed, redheaded buckaroo, one of old Sam Bender's best—a man they called Red Riley. Riley had tilted himself forward, grasped his saddle horn with his right hand and was about to swing down. The bullet caught him in the chest. He reeled backward over the cantle of the saddle, his head bumping his horse's rump. The horse lunged. Riley hung in the saddle for a moment, then came down on

his head and shoulders. He lay still.

The report of the rifle rang again, and the black horse fell. Shuntlee carefully caught the empty shell as he extracted it, made sure it went in the deep pocket of his blanket-lined old mackinaw.

THREE shots—and all good! Men like those below became insane when they saw horses shot. Shuntlee tried for another man this time, and he got him. He was a little, squint-eyed squirt called Wyoming Jimmy, another top-hand rider for old Sam Bender's big Triple Star horse and cow outfit back there in the huge canyons and well-watered gorges of the Music Winds. Wyoming Jimmy had been hit in the right shoulder. His dropping right arm and the left hand flying to the shoulder told that. Now he was falling, the bay bucking him clear of the saddle and galloping away, the stirrups beating his sides.

Shuntlee stopped the bay, bringing him to a halt with a high-powered bullet through the chest. Snorting, every muscle straining, head high, the horse stood there for a couple of seconds, then fell forward on his belly and nose.

Shots now started pouring back as the man in black managed to pull his rifle free. Two others opened up almost at the same time, and bullets began to cry along the rim, one striking the bole of the oak.

"They got my hidin' place an' range quick enough!" There was a hint of admiration in his tone as Pike Shuntlee started sliding backward, working his way toward tall rocks in the pines behind him. "Might have expected that from Dave Bender!"

He was safe enough behind the rocks now. The early-morning's work was done; every empty shell from his rifle was safe in his big pocket. After a few rods, crossing a little rise, he was able to get up and run, zig-zagging through the pines until he came to a deep ravine

floored with a hard bed of sand. Here a tall roan was waiting, reins down.

Without stepping in the sand himself, Shuntlee reached forward with his rifle, hooking the reins on the forward sight and swinging them to his hand. He pulled the horse close and shot himself into the saddle, turning quickly away down the ravine, spurring into a gallop. The sand deadened the sounds of the hoofs.

When he left the ravine it was at a place where shale covered the ground and would not show prints. He rode into another ravine to his right, working southward toward Buffalo Bow. He pulled up in a pine choked little depression, and dismounted.

He took a short-handled horse-shoeing hammer from his saddle pocket and lifted the roan's right hind foot. There was a flattened strip of iron fastened to the shoe by two nails. He removed the nails and strip, putting them in the pocket with the cartridges. Then he drove a couple of extra nails in the holes, giving the ends a twist with the claws of the hammer and carefully breaking them off and flattening them. The job was perfect, for he had once worked as a blacksmith.

Now he cleaned the rifle with a pull-through from his saddle pocket. He oiled it perfectly, and reloaded it with five extra cartridges. Everything was perfect! He mounted again, and the tall roan moved on.

At a deep hole in a creek he soon came to, he disposed of the hammer, the pull-through, empty shells, and the flattened strip of iron with its two drawn nails. Now it was as good as ever. All hell would be to pay—and somebody besides Pike Shuntlee would have to do the paying!

A short time later he had climbed a little bench and was swinging south once more, this time on the hard-gravel trail leading into Buffalo Bow. When he swung around the stables and corrals behind the

jail and came to the front, old Buck Heeney was on the porch, tilted back against the wall in a lopsided chair, his battered gray hat slanted down over his left eye to shut out the glare while the rest of him soaked in the sunshine.

“WELL, I went and I looked.” Shuntlee dropped his reins over the warped hitchrack. He took down his rifle from the saddle as the first thing, then the strip of cartridges from behind the cantle of the saddle, and laid them with the rifle on the porch. “Didn’t think I’d need this thing, but I took it along when yuh insisted.”

“Yuh allus take a rifle when yuh hit for the hills, Pike,” the old sheriff said sleepily. “Never know when somebody’s liable to start passin’ lead yore way, though I don’t say Tom Case would ever do that. Ain’t the kind, Tom ain’t. What’d yuh find this mornin’ up there?”

“Tom’s gettin’ set to run off more whiskey.” Shuntlee stopped and leaned against the hitchrack. “Eighteen barrels of mash in the same old cave where that stream of water comes out. Tom’ll never learn. Just can’t quit making whiskey.”

“I guess it’s tradition with Tom,” yawned the sheriff. “His daddy, his granddaddy, an’ maybe all his great-granddaddies for forty generations behind him made whiskey before ’im. Tom told me once that the first thing he could clear remember in his earliest childhood was his father pokin’ firewood under a still, and there ain’t no question but what Tom himself makes the best damn whiskey ever come from the mouth of a jug.”

“Then,” frowned the under-sheriff, “why have me out spyin’ on ’im ’fore daylight—on an empty stomach? Damn it, Buck, I didn’t ask for that job or want it. Yuh,” he stabbed a finger at the sheriff, “sent me, ordered me to go. I’ll bet I had to walk six miles, there an’ back on the snop from where I had to leave my

horse! What was the big idea, anyway?”

“Pike, I know I sent yuh.” The sheriff grinned now. “Just twixt us two, I had hopes Tom would spot yuh, an’ maybe move his fool barrels outa that fool cave. This is Saturday as yuh know. By Tuesday—no later than Thursday—some of them damn federal revenue squirts will be here. I hate to think of seein’ Tom hauled off to the federal pen.

“It wouldn’t be fair to Tom.” He lifted his head, his pale eyes thoughtful. “Tom’s ever’body’s friend, good an’ bad, rich an’ pore. Damn it, Pike, I tried to talk to ’im only three weeks ago. ‘Buck,’ sez he, ‘yuh talk like yo’re outa good drinkin’ whiskey.’ That night, ’way after midnight, somebody knocked on my back door. Knocked to beat hell. When I got up an’ went out on the back porch I come nigh to breakin’ my neck over a half-barrel of whiskey. Some of that whiskey’s what knocked loose that last go-down of mine with my ol’ lumbago. I just can’t bear the thoughts of them federals gettin’ Tom.”

“Then yo’d better talk to ’im.” Shuntlee straightened. “He’ll be in town today for sure. I’m hungry. If yo’ll unload my rifle an’ put it an’ my cartridges back in the gun-locker, I’ll take my horse to the corral. Then I’m headin’ straight home for some breakfast.”

“Sleep ’til ’round noon with it,” advised the sheriff, bringing his chair down with a bang and reaching for the rifle and cartridges, “an’ be back on the job for the afternoon an’ night. Saturday as yuh know is a tough day, ever’body comin’ in, an’ heavy drinkin’ goin’ on.

“I won’t send yuh out to spy on Tom agin, Pike. I aim to talk turkey to Tom. I’ll tell ’im flat that I’m ridin’ out to that cave come tomorrow mornin’. If he’s within a mile of it, I’ll bring ’im in, and bust up his barrels an’ anything else I find lyin’ around. . . . When do yuh think he’ll be ready to start running of his mash?”

"No later'n Monday, I'd say," grinned the undersheriff, reaching for his reins. "All told, he'll be runnin' off for the rest of the week. Yo'd better talk to him to-day!"

Shuntlee moved away now, heading for the corrals. The sheriff sat there slowly unloading the rifle. Something made him slip out the bolt, lift the weapon and look through the barrel. Clean as a whistle, the way Pike always kept a gun after he'd given him a talking when he found an uncleaned weapon in the locker. That was when Pike first came to work for him. After that talking he always put up his horse and came in to clean his guns—if he'd used them on a job. A clean gun was always ready to meet trouble. A gun with a fouled barrel always ready to make it—and always when you were unprepared for it.

He put the rifle and cartridges away, then glanced out the window and saw Shuntlee hurrying homeward. Good man, that! Right after noon he would be back on the job. Tonight, if things turned tough, he would get out the wheel-barrow to bring the drunks up the street to the back door and drag them in. Might have to knock hell out of two or three, but Pike wouldn't do it until it just had to come to that. Buck Heeney had taught him a lot of things, shaping him for the job he one day hoped to see Pike holding. In two years there would be another election. Buck Heeney was dreaming of stepping aside, getting too old and tired to go on. A man at seventy had a right to step down, to hang up his guns and spurs, and listen no longer to his horse's hoofs on the hard trails in all kinds of weather. A man at seventy had a right to rest, to sit on his porch with his wife and rock, to get all the sleep he wanted. nights.

All he wanted was a good, decent man to take over. Pike Shuntlee would be that man. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Kill All Sheebers!

HE WAS soon back on the porch, dozing in the warm spring sunshine. At either side of him hung a worn Peacemaker Colt, beautifully hand-engraved, silver-mounted and beaded with gold and silver. Those six-shooters, along with the once-fine belts and holsters had been a Christmas present from the people of Buffalo Bow and most all the people north, south, east and west of the town for seventy miles. That had been right after he had single-handedly wiped out the bloody Red Allen Gang—one man in the rocks against nine rustlers trapped at the head of a narrow gorge in the tall hills forty miles north of town.

The six-shooters were now like the belts and holsters. They were old and worn, time and battle-scarred. But he was like that all over, himself, from his toe nails to the top of his silver-haired head. Time and the mountains dug holes in a man. His wife, Ann, fortunately, was sixty seven. Only sixty seven! She was short and a little dumpy, good-natured, always smiling, and as spry as a buggy whip. Between her and big, fat old Mary, a Tongue River squaw who had been with them a dozen long years to help Ann out with things, they always had hot grub on the stove and the linement bottle ready when he came home.

It was early, not yet eight o'clock, but Buffalo Bow was already stirring. Men were moving quietly up and down either side of the street, half of them out for their morning dram. Stores and saloons were open. At eight o'clock the little "one-hoss" bank on the east side of the street would unlock its door. Straight on past it, beyond the public stables, smoke was already mushrooming in dark clouds from the cupola on the roof of lean old Rube Rainey's blacksmith shop, and Rube's

hammer was going it like sixty, ringing real music from his big steel anvil.

Hoofs beating across the big flat west of the creek finally stirred him alert. He read things in the sounds of hoofs, and his chair came down with a bang. He took a look to westward, and a puzzled frown crossed his face.

Seven riders were coming to town, all mounted on those fine Triple Star horses bred and raised in the great Gray Grizzly Basin. Short, stout and gray-mustached old Sam Bender was slightly in the lead on a big, fire-ball chestnut sorrel with a silvery mane. Young Dave Bender, about twenty three now, was only a yard behind to Sam's right. Heeney only glanced at the others, knowing them as Sam's top-hand riders.

Sam was as mad as hell about something. The fierce, war-like pound of the hoofs told a man that. Maybe another pack of rustlers had stolen in and gone to work on his horses, for every horse Sam raised was sure to bring top money when buyers flocked in in the early spring and the fall.

After they had crossed the creek, one of the riders swung away from the others, and headed toward Doc Shaw's office a few doors above the bank. Bender and the rest came straight on, Sam slamming to a quick halt in front of the steps of the jail. As he piled out of his saddle, Heeney saw that Sam was grim-faced, his lips bloodless from anger. He banged up the steps, spurs ringing harshly, a long old Frontier .45 at either hip, a cracking-new high-powered rifle on his saddle.

A glance showed the sheriff that Dave Bender had added another wide cartridge belt, holster and long Colt to his waistline, and there was a high-power on his saddle. All the others were the same, armed as if hot on the trail of big, big trouble somewhere!

"Howdy, Sam!" Heeney lifted himself to his feet, feeling an ache jump here and there in his bones. "Yuh come early.

What brings yuh to town? House afire?"

"No, my house is not afire!" Sam's voice was hard, as he banged on to the porch. "Damnit, it's started, Buck!"

"Quiet now, Sam." The sheriff lifted a gnarled hand. "Don't set the seat of yore pants afire hollerin'. Whut's started? Yuh goin' on another tooter after all Doc Frank Shaw told yuh, Sam?"

"No!" Sam stomped the floor, his spurred heel ringing. "I ain't goin' on another tooter! Ain't had a drink in nigh two years, but maybe," he scowled bitterly, "I'll have to go back to it now. Olaf Hansen's started another war!"

THE sheriff's eyes popped. "War's the last thing on earth Olaf Hansen would want these days. He's fair rich an' satisfied, not out to make trouble for anybody. Hell, yuh whipped 'im outa all such fool notions twenty-some years ago, Sam!"

"I did, huh? Whipped 'im outa all such notions!" Sam was snarling again. "Well, I'll prove what I say. Don't stand there with yore eyeballs poppin' like a frog's. Take a look at these!" He rammed his right hand down in his chaps' pocket and brought out five big, bottle-necked rifle shells, and poked them under the sheriff's nose. "Maybe yuh can tell me who'n hell else in this whole country has got a gun that would shoot them things, Buck!"

"Why, yeah, Sam, if yo'll come on inside." Heeney turned back into the doorway. Inside the office he stopped and pointed to a display of various old weapons hanging on pegs at either side of the window. "There's two of 'em. Rooshin things, I think somebody told me."

"There's two of 'em, yeah!" Bender banged angrily forward and took both weapons from the wall. "An', look at 'em! Choke-full of dust, gettin' rusty inside the barrels. These things ain't been fired in years an' years, Buck Heeney! Not since the day you took 'em off'n two crazy sheepherders up in Big Wolf Canyon."

Bender slammed the old weapons back on their pegs and turned to glare. "Ever'-body remembers that. Yuh ol' jackass, yuh went in on 'em with both shootin' to kill yuh, and warped 'em over the head. I'll admit that took guts, but don't try tellin' me them guns've been fired since that day!"

"Better come set down, Sam," ordered the sheriff, turning wearily toward his desk. "And yuh better let Dave do the talkin'. Dave's got some sense an' won't bust my ear drums hollerin' his head off."

"I've got a tongue in my own head!"

"Sam," Heeney turned behind his desk, the shadow of a frown etching his face, "it sounds like two or three or four when yuh get mad, an' each one longer'n a wagon tongue. Now set down, and let Dave talk! I don't want yuh or anybody else to get me mad this mornin'! *Set down*, I said!"

"Well—er—hell, awright, Buck." Old Sam eased himself into a chair. "I—I ain't got nothin' agin yuh. Been yore friend for years. I vote for yuh ever' time. Aim to keep votin'—"

"Shut up!" cut in the sheriff, hands gripping the arms of his chair. "An *damn* yore *vote*! Votes are what's wrong with me now. Didn't want this fool job from the start, ain't wanted it since, but somehow yuh fools push me back in. Now *set an' shut*!" He banged the desk with his fist. "Yuh speak the piece, Dave. If he starts howlin' like a wolf agin I'll take 'im by the seat of the pants, an' throw him off the porch."

DAVE BENDER spoke slowly, his eyes filled with more trouble than the sheriff had ever seen in them before. "I was on the yellow mare, a few rods in front of the others when I came out in the big canyon. Suddenly there was the shot. The mare went backward and down, and had to be shot because her hip was shattered. Then there was another shot

and Red Riley went down, shot through the chest. For a devil of a time we thought he was dead.

"The third shot came then, killing Riley's horse. I don't know why any man would have wanted to do that. Then Wyoming Jimmy got a bullet through the right shoulder, and his bay was shot and killed by the fifth shot right after Jimmy was bucked off. As soon as I could get my wits together I sent one of the boys high-tailing it back to the house for a buckboard and Dad."

"Yuh fellas do any shootin' back, Dave?"

"Yes, when some of the scare had gone out of us."

"Yuh was scared, eh?"

"Shaking like dogs that's just crawled out of an icy river!" Dave Bender tried to smile. "We fired a lot of shots, but they were a waste of lead. The buckboard's coming in now with Riley and Jimmy," he said, glancing out the door. "I hope they pull through as good as new. They're two fine fellows."

"Don't roam all over!" Sam Bender snapped. "Tell 'im how we went up on the rim at that oak an' found the shells, damnit!"

"Yeah," Dave Bender said, looking down at his hands in his lap. "We found these beside the old tree."

"How about them hoss tracks in the sand?" urged on the father. "Tell 'im, damn it! The track with the side-bar on the shoe to level the foot! I saw Rube Rainey down at the blacksmith shop puttin' that thing on Olaf Hansen's big iron-gray no more'n ten days ago!"

"It—it looked like a track that might have been made by Hansen's iron-gray," Dave Bender admitted. "But," he looked at his father quickly, "other horses are shod with side-bars, Dad."

"An' their owners shoot Rooshin guns?" Sam Bender sneered. "Dave, yuh act just like yo're tryin' yore damndest

to shield Olaf Hansen for some no-account reason. What'n hell's come over yuh?"

"Nothing!" Dave snapped. "I want to be sure before we grab our guns and head for war!"

"An' that," nodded the sheriff, "is why I wanted Dave to do the talkin'. That head of his has brains down there under the hair. He's fair an' square, Sam. Yo're just a plain damned fool when yuh get mad." He leaned forward, staring intently into the younger Bender's eyes. "Yuh ain't a boy to ever lie to me. Answer me straight: Do yuh think Olaf Hansen fired them shots?"

"No, I don't!"

Sam Bender was on his feet with a jump. "Dave, I'm a good notion to shoot yuh. My own son—"

"SET!" bawled the sheriff, coming to his feet. "Dave, he believes just what I believe. Somebody's plantin' stinkweed on us, Sam! Somebody's out to make war between yuh an' Olaf!"

"Damn it, Buck, I got proof," Sam said. "Yo're takin' sides with Olaf, an' I believe," he looked mean and narrowly at his son, "Dave's doin' the same thing."

"I'm going to see Olaf Hansen." Dave Bender rose from his chair. "I'm going up in Big Wolf Canyon—and talk to him!"

"Yuh fool, yuh ain't!" Bender took a step toward him. "I'll have yuh locked up first!"

"By who!" hooted the sheriff, glaring. "Yo're the one who'll probably get it 'fore yo're done. Why—er—hello, Pike!" A shadow had filled the door. "Thought yuh wouldn't come down until after noon?"

"Changed my mind," grinned the undersheriff. "Hello, Sam! Howdy, Dave! What's new up in Gray Grizzly Basin?"

"New!" snorted the elder Bender. "Murder! Leastwise of horses! I've got one man bad hit an' he may die. An-

other'n got a busted shoulder. Dry-gulched this mornin' from the rim of—"

"Set down, Pike!" cut in the sheriff. "Glad yuh come back after all. Me an' Dave's goin' somewhere, if yo'll stick around here an' keep things cool for me."

"An' yuh, Sam!" He stabbed a forefinger at him. "Quit yore blowin'. Don't go down the street telling ever'body what yuh think. Let me an' Dave have a little time. We'll be back 'fore noon. He can show me whut I want to see—an' maybe I can tell yuh whether yo're right or wrong when we get back. 'I'm as mad about this as yuh are—madder! But I want no more wars in my district. Damn it, I was just this mornin' dreamin' of hangin' up my guns an' spurs. Please, Sam, stay here at the jail 'til we get back. Better still, go up to my house, yuh an' yore men. My Ann an' ol' Mary'll feed yuh, givin' yuh the best we've got, down to a few drams of my whiskey. If—"

Sam Bender wheeled toward the door, "I'm my own boss! I go where I hell-well please! I'm goin' down to the Standin' Wall an' wet up my whistle a little. Then I'm goin' over the Doc Shaw's office, then back to the Standin' Wall. Olaf Hansen may just be fool enough to come ridin' in with some of his sheep crowd, an' if he does, I'll kill 'im!"

"Catch 'im, Pike!" snapped the sheriff. "Catch 'im!"

"Catch 'im?" Pike Shuntlee's big right hand shot out, catching Bender by the back of the collar. "Yore orders are some-thin' I carry out! Wait, Sam!"

The sheriff was sweeping forward now. "To keep the damn fool outa trouble I'm takin' his guns for now an' throwin' 'im in jail. I'm still sheriff of Buffalo Bow, an' I'm runnin' this town the way I see fit. Yuh start to fight, now, an' I'll knock hell outa yuh—yuh thick-headed ol' fool! I'm takin' these belts an' guns. Stand still, or I'll bust yore jaws from ear to ear. *Stand!*"

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Can't Talk

TO MUFFLE some of Sam's raging oaths, they locked him up downstairs in the old basement section of the jail, and left him there in a stone-walled cell with his hands gripping the rusty steel door, trying to shake it down. Neither Heeney nor Shuntlee paid any attention to the names he was calling them. They went back upstairs, closing all doors behind them.

Now Dave Bender followed the sheriff outside, picked up his reins, and they moved on around to the stables, the sheriff carrying the same rifle and cartridges Shuntlee had brought back to the jail. Bender saddled the old man's horse, his tall, white Silver, and they were soon riding away, heading northward for the mouth of Big Wolf Canyon.

They were inside of it when they heard hoofs coming. Looking up they saw the big, blond Olaf Hansen coming on his big iron-gray. Behind him trailed seven of his sheepherders—shaggy-haired men, each with a six-shooter at his hip and a rifle on his saddle.

"An' now we meet the other devil," nodded the sheriff. "I take it that he yet don't like yuh none too good, Dave."

"He doesn't!" Dave Bender half-smiled. "Just can't forget the all-out lickin' the old man and his Triple Star gave him the year I was born. Some men hold things forever."

"Yeah, that's true," again nodded the sheriff. "But don't let anybody tell yuh it was an all-out lickin', Dave. That's yore daddy's talk. If it hadn't been for me, Olaf Hansen would be fightin' yet—or in his grave. I worked like a hoss an' used ever'body I could as go-betweens to stop that war. Hiyah, Olaf!" He shot up his hand and yelled when Hansen was still riding. "How yuh doin' these days?"

"I tank I be doin' yooost fine." Hansen answered when he pulled up his iron-gray. Coldly, he avoided looking directly at Dave Bender. "I do fine most anytime, I tank. Vat you doin' in Big Volf, Heeney?"

"Comin' to see yuh, Olaf." The sheriff smiled. "I want yuh to help me out with somethin'. Dave, here, ain't got nothin' agin yuh. Ain't never had, I reckon. Got too much sense."

"Vat you vant, Heeney?"

"First off," the sheriff said, "I want yuh to send yore men back up the canyon. I don't want yuh or any of 'em in Buffalo Bow today. Somethin's come up, Olaf. It's damn bad if it gets too far out of hand. I might have to lock yuh up an' wait to see if a certain fella dies or gets well. If he dies yuh might be charged with a right sharp case of murder."

"Murder?" The Swede's eyes widened. "Yooost vat you tryin' to say to me, Heeney?"

"Damn it," scowled the sheriff, "I've said it. *Murder!* Judge Roy Nance will order yuh held without bail, anyhow 'til he sees if Red Riley comes outa' it or dies complete. I wanta help yuh, Olaf. Dave wants to help yuh, too. Believe it or not, Dave's on yore side this far."

"Heeney," Hansen's answer was cold and flat despite his half-musical Swedish accent, "I vant no damn help from no Bender. I vant no part of no Bender. I would heap better like to shoot one."

"Now yo're talkin' just like a jackass brays!" snapped the sheriff, his dander beginning to rise. "Send them men back to the ranch like I said. They ain't goin' on into Buffalo Bow today. I mean that, Olaf. Right now yo're goin' with me. Yuh can keep ignorin' Dave if yuh wanta, but this is no time to be thinkin' of a cow an' sheep war that happened the year Dave was born. Yuh old fool, Dave had no part in any of it, an' yuh know it!"

"Heeney, I start for Buffalo Bow." Hansen's right hand dropped to his thigh, close to a long Colt at his hip.

"Put that hand back on yore saddle horn, Olaf!" The sheriff's tone had suddenly changed. With no apparent effort, a long old Peacemaker had wheeled up in his right hand, the muzzle covering the sheepman. "I had to pull one of these on yuh years ago to keep yuh from gettin' killed. I had to whang yuh over the head an' make yore gang take yuh back home. I'm still the same Buck Heeney today.

"Tell yore men to turn back—an' stay back! I wanta keep yore damned old hard-headed Swede nose outa trouble. I'm maybe savin' yuh from another war. If yuh or them jokers behind yuh try to push past me on this trail, then I'm openin' air-holes through some guts 'round here. Tell 'em to turn back!"

"Vell, turn back, fellers." He turned himself in his big old saddle to give the order. "This damn old fool is plain crazy this mornin'. He might shoot a fellow without knowin' vat he vas doin'."

"An' don't try to sneak back!" Heeney added. "We're not goin' to harm Olaf. I'm his friend, damn 'im. He just ain't got sense enough to know it yet."

"Ja, I know you my friend, Heeney." Hansen settled back in his saddle. "Yoost have such a pore vay showin' it, pokin' a sax-shooter at my belly! Vere in hail ve goin'?"

"Not far, I reckon, Olaf." The long Colt slid back into the old man's worn holster. "We'll be quick as we can. I've got plenty of trouble on my hands back in town. Somehow, damnit, I'm gofina whip that trouble. I don't wanta have to lock you up an' spend all summer carryin' yuh grub. Yuh eat like a hoss founderin' 'imself in an open grain box, an' I'm gettin' too cockeyed old to be carryin' them heavy baskets back an' forth. How far's them tracks in the sand from here, Dave?

Ain't more'n a mile or so, is it, Dave?"

"Not over that," said Bender. "It won't take long."

"I NOT been up this vay for sax months!" Hansen pulled up and stared when Dave Bender led them to the sand-floored ravine. "I vonder vat you vant, Heeney. You still crazy as hail!"

"Yo'll maybe know what I want in a minute, Olaf." The sheriff dropped to the ground. "Just swing down an' watch. I wanta use yore hoss."

"Vell, yoost go ahead!"

Heeney took the reins and carefully led the horse at arm's length past the tracks in the sand. The sand was hard and smooth, the hoofprints almost perfect. Once past the others Heeney dropped the iron-gray's reins and turned back, staring and comparing the prints.

"Just what I figured I'd find!" He half-grinned now. "Look at 'em, Dave. Yuh look at 'em, too, Olaf. Notice that side-bar in the first, an' then the other tracks. Yores is a full inch an' a half longer'n the other, an'," he turned quickly back to Hansen's horse, lifting the right hind foot to look at his shoe, "yore hoss has three nails through the side-bar in holes punched after the bar was welded to the shoe. Yuh mark them tracks, Dave, an' well. Maybe I can bring yore ol' fool daddy here with yuh an' have a look at them.

"An' now, Olaf, I wanta ask yuh somethin'." He had carefully led the iron-gray clear of the other tracks, glancing at the long old rifle on the Swede's saddle. "Just when is the last time yuh fired that old rattle-trap rifle of yores?"

"Rattle-trap!" snorted Hansen. "That be a damn good gun! It be Rooshin. Only day before yesterday I kill two voves with it in Big Volf Canyon. Five shoots, an' I hit one volf two times!"

"I don't believe a word of it, Olaf," said the sheriff, pumping him now. "Not

unless both them wolves went to sleep on the sights of the gun!"

The Swede threw up both hands angrily. "I drop the first vone at three hundred yards. I drop the other at sax, the one I shoot two times!" His eyes suddenly brightened. "Yoost ask Pike Shuntlee! He vas standin' right behind me!"

"Pike!" The sheriff echoed. "He—was in Big Wolf? What'n hell was he doin' there?"

"Some monkey business for you, maybe." The Swede shrugged. "I didn't ask Pike. He yoost come along, an' the volves yump up."

"I—I see," muttered the sheriff, rubbing his chin. "I see. But look here, Olaf. I still don't want yuh an' yore herders in town today. Now I can tell yuh why." He told all he knew of the shooting on the rim, and showed Hansen the empty rifle shells. "Somebody's tryin' to job yuh, Olaf. Somebody's tryin' to start another cow an' sheep war!"

"But, I vant no more war!" Hansen threw up his hands. "Var does no good, Heeney! Var only kills, only costs money—lots! An'—an'," he lowered his head, voice lowering with it, "brings blood an' the tears an' the broken heart."

"I know, Olaf." Heeney put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Yo're thinkin' of yore young Ole who got killed in the last one."

"My Ole, ya." A couple of tears were beginning to slip down this big, hard Swede's face. "My Ole! Then my vife, Olga. Olga yoost couldn't take it. In three years she be only a ghost. In four I bury her, yoost after my Yaney born. Olga name Yaney such a purty name."

"I know, Olaf." There was great tenderness in old Buck Heeney's tone. "Maybe half of what I'm tryin' to do here is for yore Janey. She's like her mammy, a good gal! Purty as a golden slipper! I—What the hell now!"

A bullet from a tall, pine and rock-covered rise eight hundred yards to eastward had wailed between them. It passed under Heeney's arm and struck the ground a few yards away, ripping a long gash in the sand. The distant report of a rifle followed it, then the shriek of another bullet in the air just above their heads.

"Lord," half-wailed the sheriff, "let's get outa here. Somebody's shootin' to kill *us* now!"

Two more shots came before they could get started, the two shots almost like one. One of the shrieking bullets went through Hansen's old hat, within a quarter of an inch from the base of his skull. The other grazed Buck Heeney's chin just enough to draw the blood.

Now they were getting away, rushing into a smaller ravine on the south side of the larger one. Dave Bender was in the lead, running like a scared wolf. He had left his horse up in the pines with the sheriff's. In a minute, concealed by the pines, he was in the saddle and reeling his horse away to southward. It looked as if he was heading back for Buffalo Bow as fast as he could, leaving the others to their lot like a coward.

"Yellow belly!" howled Hansen. "He run away yoost like a scared dog! He's no good!"

"Yo're a liar an' know it, Olaf!" Buck Heeney was hauling his rifle down from the saddle. "There ain't a Bender I ever saw who'll run out on yuh in a fight. Get down that ol' gun an' we'll see what we can do to stop that shootin' over yonder."

BULLETS were pouring blindly into the pines as, each with his rifle, the old sheriff and the big Swede made their run, getting away from the horses and to rocks at the edge of the pines. Here they settled down and opened up, whistling their bullets at the top of the knoll.

"It'll at least let 'em know what side

we're on!" snarled the sheriff savagely.

"Ja!" nodded the Swede, letting go with a shot that sounded like a young cannon from the muzzle of his old weapon. "But I still say Dave Bender run away yooost like a yellow-belly dog. Look!" He lifted his hand and pointed. "There he go!"

Bender had already managed to cross the creek below them. Now he was sweeping up a long slope to a tall flat south of the rise. They saw him pull up in a little cluster of pines and big rocks. He hit the ground with his rifle, disappearing, getting himself clear of the horse. In a matter of seconds they heard his rifle opening up, steadily, surely.

There were no more shots coming from the rise now. Heeney and the big Swede's steady firing was routing the riflemen there, making them turn tail and run for it. Now Bender ceased firing, rushed back to his horse, and was sweeping on to a pine and rock-covered smaller rise. There he went out of his saddle again and they heard him open up once more.

"He's got something to shoot at now!" cried the sheriff. "Look! Two of 'em!"

"Ja!" nodded Hansen, staring, realizing that those riders were well out of the range of his old gun now. "Heeney, you right for vonce in your life!"

Both lay there behind their shelter, staring. The two riders had evidently had their horses hidden behind the rise and below them. Now they were whipping and spurring furiously.

Dave Bender was still shooting. At the next crash of his rifle, Heeney and Hansen saw the rider in the lead buck straight in his saddle. His hat flew off. For a second he was as rigid as iron in the saddle, then he was pitching forward to grab the horn. Bender's next shot spilled him. The man hit the ground, one of his split reins still gripped in his left hand. His horse snaked him along for a couple of rods before it

bucked to a halt and swung around to face him.

"He's done!" cried the sheriff. "I can tell by the way he fell!"

"Ja!" nodded Hansen. "But look at the other fellar! That Bender's lettin' 'im get away!"

Dave had stopped shooting, though the second rider was still in plain sight, a bullet from Dave's rifle yet able to reach him. A puzzled frown buckled its way across the old sheriff's face. Then he understood.

"That's a Bender for yuh!" His words were almost a yell. "That fella's turned, goin' straight away from Dave now, an' look! He's all piled over the neck of his hoss! A ball hittin' him would pass on through an' kill the hoss! Yuh fool Swede, yuh oughta knòw there never was a Bender who'd shoot a hoss, unless it had to be done to take 'im outa his misery. Look! Dave's in the saddle agin. He's gonna try to short-cut 'im an' head 'im off for a side shot!"

"Let's get goin', Olaf!" He swung back toward the horses, slipping new cartridges in his rifle's magazine. "There's one dead man over there we can look at!"

"Ya," nodded the Swede, following him, "but dead man not bane worth a damn. A dead man can't talk."

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Dead Hombres

THEY were soon there, pounding up and piling out of their saddles. The dead man was sprawled on his face now, his dead hand still holding the rein, his horse snorting. Heeney had to pry open the hand. He reached the rein up to Hansen.

"Hold that hoss!" he ordered. "I aim to have me a good look at this critter an' see who he is!"

He rolled the man over, then jerked to his feet as a distant report of a shot

came to him, then another and another. That meant Dave had short-cut the other fellow, and maybe needed help. With scarcely more than a glance at the dead man, the old sheriff wheeled to his horse.

"Stay here, Olaf!" he cried, swinging into his tall old Silver's saddle. "That's Dave gettin' the other'n! He may need me!"

He pounded away, leaving the big Swede standing there staring. At the end of seven hundred yards he had come to the top of a little rise that was like a ridge on the big, knoll-dotted flat. At once he was sawing to a halt, eyes widening as he sat there staring.

The shooting was over—and Dave seemed all right! He had left his horse standing in a tall bowl of rocks and was going forward to another pile of rocks possibly two hundred yards away, towards a rider-less horse. Somewhere in those rocks, the second rifleman was sprawled.

Buck Heeney spurred his Silver down the slope. Before he could get there Dave had disappeared in between the rocks. When the sheriff pulled up and followed, he found him bending over a big redhead flat on his back, with his arms flung out at either side of him, his face twisted with pain.

"It's pretty bad!" Dave Bender glanced up. "Two shots through the chest. He stopped to fight back."

"Who'n hell is he?" demanded the sheriff. "I've seen that red mug before, but I can't place it, all bucked up an' twisted like it is now."

"Don't know him myself." Bender glanced up again. "But I did see him about ten days ago in Jules Gant's Standing Wall when I went in to get Red Riley and Wyoming Jimmy to come on home with me. Jules seemed to know him. He was drinking with him and a couple of others at the foot of the bar, all of them

talking in low tones. How's the other fellow? I didn't have time to stop and look."

"Oh, he's not bad!" lied the sheriff. "Talkin' his head off back there to Olaf Hansen now. Blames ever'thing on this duck here. Said he didn't do any shootin' to hit anybody. Claims he kept his bullets high an' wide, an' it was only this duck who was tryin' for a kill."

"He's a liar!" The wounded redhead looked up with a snarl, forgetting some of his pain. "Blackie Turk's turned State witness . . . twice before . . . in jams like this. I—I warned Jules Gant!"

"Too late now to kick," shrugged the sheriff. "Blackie Turk an' Jules Gant will get their heads togeher. Twix' the two they'll swear 'emselves clear, an' then I'll just have yuh to hang. What's yore name? Yuh might as well come clean."

"My—name's—none of yore—damn business!" gasped the wounded man. "Maybe Pike Shuntlee—yore damn fine deppity—can tell yuh!"

"Pike! The sheriff's face was suddenly bloodless. "What—what's Pike Shuntlee got to do with it! Other fella said yuh would try to pile things on the best men in town. Yo're lyin'!"

"Best—men in—town!" Blood came out of both sides of the wounded man's mouth as he tried to smile. "His name was Lee Shunt—six or seven—years ago—in Texas. I went to the pen with 'im for stealin' cattle on the Pecos. Yuh—trustin'—ol' fool! Yuh—"

A convulsive shudder suddenly struck him. His arms shot down, stiffening along his sides as if trying to hold back the inevitable. In a few seconds he relaxed, went limp heap from head to heel. When the sheriff glanced up Dave Bender had taken off his hat. Clumsily, the sheriff reached up for his own.

"I guess that's all," he muttered. "Went

out too fast on us. Mighta learned more. But," he shook back his shoulders, old eyes hardening, "I can't believe a damn word he said about Pike. Jules Gant, yes! Jules has always been tryin' to cook up grand schemes since he's been in Buf-falo Bow. Allus pitchin' his poke on the wrong side. But—but Pike, no. It's a lie, Dave!" He looked at Bender again with those hard eyes. "A way to get back at me, to hurt me. This duck knowed he was dyin'. His kind hit back at yuh even when they're slippin' into their graves. Don't yuh say nothin' about this, Dave. Nary word. Leave it all to me!"

"**A**LL right, Buck." Young Bender stared back at the dead man. "Just as you say, and I think you know my word's good. But let me tell *you* something! You're the only man I know who really trusts Pike Shuntlee—or Lee Shunt, if that was what he was once called. Real old outlaws come by the Triple Star now and then. Dad's always fed them—as you know and have accused him of doing for years. They're not thieves. Just men who got in wrong with the world outside. Maybe had to kill a man, then a dozen to keep on living. Two men like that told me that Pike was playing you. I— But we'd better stop this." He had glanced up. "Here comes Olaf. The man he has roped across that horse looks like a dead one to me."

"He is, Dave," nodded the sheriff. "I lied to this fella."

"Why, come to think of it, I'm sure I've got dodgers for these birds buried somewhere among all of them that I've got pasted to the wall behind my desk."

"You got him, Dave!" Hansen spoke with a grin now, and it was the first time he had ever spoken to him. "That was one bully job! This yoker," he waved his right hand at the dead man behind him, "he's dead, too!"

"Look!" The sheriff jerked up his right hand, pointing to a racing figure in a buckskin riding skirt and a dazzling green shirtwaist sweeping toward them on a tall yellow mare. "Here comes yore Janey, Olaf! Some of yore turn-back crowd musta told her."

"My Yaney, ya!" Hansen grinned proudly.

The girl pounded up a half-minute later. She looked at her father, glanced at the sheriff, and then seemed to fix her eyes on young Bender.

"The men—who turned back—told me!" Janey Hansen was out of breath, as if she had been running herself. "Is—everybody all right?"

"Ja, ever'body, Yaney, my gal!" Olaf Hansen laughed. "Dave, he yoost kill two men vat tried to kill us!"

"Dave!" The girl flung herself out of her saddle, darting forward. "Dave!"

"Yes, Janey!" Dave Bender had moved in big long strides to meet her, his arms going out, white hat still in his right hand. The girl flung herself straight into his arms. Her hands went up, around his neck. With sudden tears on her cheeks, she lifted her face.

The big Swede piled from his saddle so quickly he fell to his hands and knees. "Vat iss this! Vat iss this! My—my little Yaney in a cowboy's arms! Heeney, I tank I bane goin' to die!" He was suddenly sobbing.

"**G**ET up from there, Olaf!" Already as nervous as a cat, it took old Buck Heeney less than ten seconds to completely lose his temper and suddenly start ripping his thoughts into harsh words. "Yuh ain't jokerin' nobody else but yorself with that fool sob-actin'. What if yuh do see Janey in a cowboy's arms! Yuh like yore beef, yore steaks three inches thick, an' somebody has got to raise it—from cows!"

"Yo're like Sam Bender, yuh fool! Sam won't touch mutton with a ten-foot pole. Says he won't eat beef cooked in a pot or a pan where mutton was ever cooked. Still, he wears wool on his back an' in his pants, in his socks an' in his drawers! Good, stout virgin wool to keep 'im warm when the blizzards blow.

"Janey's got a right to pick her man. Dave's straight. He won't lie to yuh, won't back-bite, don't drink an' run about raisin' hell. I've knowed 'im since the day he was born, an' so have yuh, almost! He's a pea in the same pod with Janey in a hundred ways. A man like him would be good to a woman.

"An' now," he took a couple of quick paces forward, "get up 'fore I kick the seat of yore pants out! If I get riled, I'm liable to jerk off one of yore arms or legs an' club yore fool brains out with it. I want yuh to help me get that dead redhead crost his saddle."

"But my Yaney in a cowboy's arms!" Hansen stumbled to his feet. Heeney, I yoost can't stand it!"

"Yo're a liar!" barked the sheriff. "Yo've got to stand it now, like losin' a leg, if it hits yuh like that! Come on an' help me. I've changed my mind about yuh not goin' to Buffalo Bow. I want yuh to go, now that Janey's here with seven times more sense than yo've got, to help me settle things. Twix' her an' Dave, maybe I can knock some sense into ol' Sam Bender's rock-hard brain. Dave'll be plenty of help. He come here tryin' to help yuh, as I told yuh. He's yore friend whether yuh like it or not. And he's gonna marry yore daughter! That's plain as a sunrise in a clear, still mornin'. Now come on, dummy!"

They piled the body of the redhead across the saddle of his black horse. Old Buck Heeney lashed the body securely with the long rope he took from the black's saddle horn.

They were soon swinging out, Heeney and Hansen in the lead, Dave Bender and Janey trailing fifty yards behind. Each were lost to their own thoughts and words, and trouble was far away for the time.

"BUCK HEENEY'S comin' in now."

Pike Shuntlee spoke through the rusty cell door to Sam Bender, still madder than a wet hen in spite of Shuntlee having gone down six or seven times to see him and talk to him, once taking him cigars and a pint of whiskey. "Maybe he'll let yuh out, Sam. I'd never throwed yuh in." His voice had dropped to a whisper. "Ain't right. I know it, but Buck's like that. Got too old, too cranky for this job. Says 'imself at times that it needs a younger man."

"An' maybe yo're that man, Pike." Bender drained the last drop of the whiskey. "There's been a lot of talk about it. Damn, I wish I'd had a decent drink left!"

"Yo've got it, Sam." Shuntlee took a second bottle from his bosom and slid it through the feed-pan slot cut in the bottom of the door. "But don't let Buck know. Hide them bottles."

"They'll be hid, Pike!" Bender had uncorked the second bottle and had downed nearly a half-pint of the whiskey. "An' how they'll be hid! Where is that ol' fool?"

"Comin' down the rise north of the jail." Shuntlee looked anxious to get back upstairs. "Dave's with 'im, and so's Olaf Hansen an' his pale-haired gal, Janey."

"Hansen!" Bender snorted, and started taking the cork out of the bottle again. "I'll kill 'im soon as I get outa here!"

"There's somethin' else. Looks like Buck an' Olaf are leading horses with dead men tied crost their saddles. But I've got to go, Sam. I'll come back, first chance. I'm yore friend. *Hide them bottles!*"

He was gone now, before Sam Bender could answer him, hurrying up the old stairs. In a minute he was sitting behind the sheriff's desk with two sawed-off shotguns in front of him. If someone didn't tell him, old Buck Heeney would never know that he had been down the street to see Jules Gant in the Standing Wall, and no less than four times at that!

CHAPTER FIVE

Double O—Red Hot

"**W**HY the smoke-poles on the desk, Pike?" It was Buck Heeney's first question when he came in. "Yuh run into some trouble while I was gone?"

"Only a few threats," Shuntlee seemed to bounce to his feet, his big hat coming off when he saw the girl. He bowed to her and her father, then faced the sheriff again. "More Triple Stars came bangin' into town. Eight of them, with seven riders from the Fiddle Drums with 'em. They joined up with the fellas that come in with Sam. Had drinks down the street, an' then come up here. But," he waved his hands to the shotguns, "I was all set an' ready with my bluff layout when they said they was going to take Sam outa here."

"That's good," The sheriff's face twisted with a wry smile. "What's Sam been doin'? Raisin' plenty of hell down there, I reckon?"

The undersheriff shrugged. "I went down a couple of times, offerin' to take him some water. He cussed me plenty. Last time I went down I took him some cigars. All he wants is out. I had to lie to him. Told him yo'd taken the keys for his door. He offered me the pick of any horse on Triple Star range if I'd go down to the blacksmith shop an' have him cut out!"

"That's Dad all over!" Dave Bender laughed now. "Maybe I can talk to him,

now that I have something to tell him."

"Yo'll go down ahead of me an' try, anyhow," nodded the sheriff. "I know I'll get forty rods of cussin' 'fore I can open my mouth an' get a word out.

"An' Pike, there's a job for yuh." He looked back at the undersheriff. "There's two dead men on two hosses out front an'—"

"Dead men!" Shuntlee's eyes widened, hands suddenly gripping the edges of the desk as if tremendously startled. "Dead men!"

"Don't let it excite yuh," scowled the sheriff. "They won't bother anybody from now on. Take 'em down the street. Go through that alley to the back door of Doc Shaw's office. Tell 'im I want him to have his man clean 'em up. I want a good look at 'em without blood on 'em."

"Yuh—yuh had a fight, Buck?" Shuntlee was still popeyed. "Who the thunder are they, anyway?"

"One's Blackie Turk, or so he said, just 'fore he died," lied the old man. "Talked quite a bit. Other'n rattled off a lot, too, Said somethin' 'bout somebody named Lee Shunt. Yuh know any new fella 'round town by that name, Pike?"

"Lee Shunt?" The undersheriff stared quickly at the desk-top, and now his face had changed color, becoming almost a sickly-yellow. "Why—why, no, I don't, Buck! But see here, now!" He looked up with an unreal little cackle. "Lee Shunt! That's almost Shuntlee! Maybe somebody's tryin' to rope me in an' make me a goat in this fool war they're tryin' to start all of a sudden, sheriff!"

"No matter for right now," shrugged the sheriff, moving on behind the desk and opening a drawer for the basement keys as the undersheriff quickly stepped out of his way. "Get them dead men to Doc Shaw's. Dave, yuh take this key an' go down there. I'll give yuh ten minutes," he hauled out his old gold chime watch, "to see what yuh can do.

"Yuh two, now," he waved his hand to the Hansens, "just set down in them chairs an' make yoreself easy. Got a drink here in the drawer of my desk, Olaf, but I'd ruther yuh wouldn't take it 'til we see what we can do. What'n hell yuh waitin' for, Pike? Put up these sawed-offs an' get them dead men down the street to Doc's. Don't look good out there still drippin' blood at the hitchrack."

Shuntlee put away the guns and hurried outside. Dave Bender was already on his way downstairs, and in a very few moments those waiting in the office could hear howls and yells coming up. Sam Bender was telling his son just what he thought of him and the rest of the cockeyed world in general. Buck Heeney grinned, and fished out his watch again, holding it in his hand now to keep track of the time. Then he looked up quickly, all ears now.

"Howlin', hootin', happy merry hell!" Sam Bender was yelling each word and punctuating it by pounding the rusty steel door with his fist. "Do yuh know what you're sayin', Dave! Yuh ain't drunk, son! Yuh never was drunk, never took to it!"

"But you heard what I said!" Dave Bender insisted. "That's as true as I stand here! And once more let me tell you that it wasn't Olaf Hansen's horse that left those tracks. The side-bar on Hansen's big iron-gray is a full inch and a half longer, and the shoe at least two sizes bigger."

"What about them empty shells!"

"They'll be explained in time, Dad, when you cool your head." Young Bender paused. "Where did you get the whiskey you've been drinking?"

"I—I ain't had no whiskey, son." Sam Bender's tone was suddenly meeker. "I'm—I'm just mad enough to fly, that's all!"

"Whiskey, huh!" Old Buck Heeney pawed his watch back into his pocket and rose to his feet. "Now who'd give him whiskey? I've gotta go see about this."

He banged away downstairs, spurs dragging. The moment Sam Bender saw him in the shadowy light he started cursing.

"I'LL kill yuh when I get outa here!" he howled, stomping the floor, shaking the door and hammering it again with the ball of his fist. "All I want is my hands on my guns, Buck Heeney! You're too damn old for yore job any more. Even Pike said—" He caught himself, stopped still for a moment, then tore loose again. "I want outa here!"

"To kill me, huh?"

"To kill ever'body in the world!"

"Let 'im rave on, Dave, an' gimme them keys." Heeney reached for them. "We'll leave it to them stone walls to cool 'im off an' sober 'im down. He's as drunk as forty barrels of wildcats, an'," his voice lowered, "only one man coulda give 'im whiskey, Dave. Didja tell 'im anything 'bout Janey?"

"Yes," grimly nodded Bender, "but he won't believe it!"

"I want outa here!" Sam Bender was howling again. "I want out!"

"Let 'im cool!" Heeney was heading for the stairs. "When he gets cool an' sober I'm lettin' 'im out. Not a second before, Dave!"

"I know you can't let him out in that condition." Dave Bender waited until they were at the head of the stairs and closing the door. "I don't want to see him kill or get killed. He's actually crazy right now, and a dangerous man to have running free."

The muffled thunder of a shot sounded down the street at that moment. Bender and the sheriff dashed to the front doorway. Hansen and his Janey bounced to their feet and stared out the window. The blue swinging doors of the Standing Wall seemed to fly to bits as they flung open. Pike Shuntlee had appeared, running and pawing the air crazily with both hands.

He wheeled drunkenly, heading up the street at the same wild run, reeling as he ran. A man shoved open one of the half-shattered swinging doors, thrusting out a big six-shooter, but keeping himself hidden. There were two more shots, fast and deadly sure. Pike reeled wildly to his left, and fell in the doorway of old Bill Martin's general store.

"Come on, Dave!" yelled the sheriff. "Leaping to one side to haul down the two sawed-off shotguns Pike had hung up. "Have yoreself one of these. Here's extra shells!" He slammed six into young Bender's hand. "These guns play hell at close range. Come!"

Janey Hansen watched him go, then dropped back in her chair, put her hands over her face and sobbed.

Hansen turned to Janey, dropped to one knee and put his arms around her. "You love that cowboy faller a lot, my Yaney?"

"Yes, Poppa!" She leaned herself to him. "More than life!"

"Then, by damn!" He surged to his feet. "Then, by damn! I go bring him back to you!" He headed for the door.

"GET my wife to—me—somehow, Buck!" Pike Shuntlee was dying when they reached him. Lean old Bill Martin had reached out, caught him by the wrist and snaked him on inside, and was closing the door just as Heeney and young Bender reached it. I wanta—see 'er!"

"I've sent my clerk for her, Buck," whispered Martin.

"All right, Pike." The sheriff squatted beside him. "She's sent for an' won't be long. Who shot yuh—an' why?"

"They thought I'd double-crossed 'em when I come down the street with—Blackie Turk an' the body—of Pecos Red—on the horses." Pike Shuntlee already had blood seeping from each side of his mouth. "I didn't double-cross, Buck. I was hittin' it square up here—until—they

came. Jules Gant had never seen me before. Been here long 'fore I come. They had it on Jules, too. Helped knock over a S. P. train for a big ninety thousan' dollar haul, ten years ago. They whipped him in line, quick. I killed a Texas Ranger on the Rio, after gettin' outa the pen. They had that on me, an' was gonna send me back—to a rope. Even—threatened to kill my wife or cut her nose an' lips off. I had—to fall in line.

"Buck, there's somethin' else." There was a painful silence for almost a minute before this started coming. In the meanwhile Olaf Hansen had banged on the door, and Bill Martin had let him in to stand there with his back to the door, staring. "I shot Red Riley an' Wyomin' Jimmy an' killed them horses. Had to. They ordered it. I couldn't think—of my wife bein' hurt. When Hansen was shootin' the wolves I was there. I went back an' picked up the empty shells. Sorry, Buck. I—I was planning hard to go straight. They came. They spoiled it."

"Yuh keep sayin' 'they' all the time, Pike." The sheriff dropped to his knees. "Just who're yuh talkin' about 'sides Blackie Turk an' Pecos Red? Who shot yuh. Them two didn't!"

Shuntlee's throat choked with blood for several seconds before he could cough it up. "Breed Jackson, the big, dark fella with a deep scar on his left cheek was one who first reached for a gun. Zane Butler, the tall, thin fella with the pale hair, reached, too. That was their names in the Southwest. Call 'emselves Wilson an' Sneed here. Other two in the Standin' Wall when I sneaked over call 'emselves Joe Snyder an' Ben Green. I—didn't know 'em in the Southwest. Neither did—Jules Gant. Yuh know 'em. Come a month ago. Claim to be here lookin' things over—for a spur-line railroad runnin' up from South Bend." He tried to nod to southward.

"By why'n hell did they wanta start

a cow an' sheep war, Pike?" he asked.

"To—upset the whole country." Shuntlee whispered. "To get yuh killed off—an' all the good men fighting each other. Others woulda got scared of the hell they aimed to start in the littler towns 'round us, and run off. Leaving the whole district wide-open, givin' 'em free hands. Then, Buck, they coulda robbed ever' bank around. Nine of them—in just a couple of—days after cuttin' the—telegraph line between 'em. They're—smart, Buck."

"Just them six, countin' Turk an' Pecos Red?" The sheriff asked.

"Not just them six, Buck." Shuntlee tried to shake his head. "A full dozen more woulda come in, plantin' 'emselves in the littler towns until the cow an' sheep fight got goin' hot. Even more mighta come. They—wasn't tellin' me ever'thing. Not tellin' Jules. Wish I—hadn't gone into the Standin' Wall—so quick. No matter." He tried to shrug. "Breed Jackson an' Zane Butler would've got me sooner or later. They—Jackson 'an Butler—are worth a lot of money—even dead an' in a box, Buck. So's Turk an' Pecos Red, now that they've killed me for somethin' yuh know—I didn't do. It was nice goin' 'er straight—with yuh, Buck. I—"

A shot from the back door cut him short. A short, bulky man had appeared there for just an instant, a six-shooter roaring, the bullet tearing through Shuntlee's head, passing on and burying itself in the floor between Olaf Larsen's legs.

Dave Bender had just glanced at the doorway. His shotgun flung up. Before the man back there could fire a second shot the shotgun's right barrel filled the store with a roar and a long-licking gash of flame. The man in the doorway had wheeled. He stopped suddenly, six-shooter flying out of his hand. As he reeled back, Hansen and the sheriff opened up. The man fell, riddled with enough lead to kill a dozen men.

"One down, three to go!" cried the sheriff. "Let's get 'em! I'll go to the back door of the Standin' Wall. Yuh two take the front. Wait 'til yuh hear me shoot, then come in blazin'."

BENDER led the way out the front door of the store, shotgun reloaded, with Olaf Hansen right behind him. When they stepped to the sidewalk the street seemed strangely quiet. In times like this there were usually crowds pouring from everywhere. Doors were shut now. Men from across the street had poured out, but they had gone right back inside. In a second Dave Bender knew why.

A shot thundered at him from the high, flat roof of the Standing Wall, the bullet slapping a hole through the wide brim of his hat within an inch of his ear. He let go the right barrel of the shotgun, then Hansen was firing. But the man on the roof had ducked back and out of danger.

"By yimminy," cried the Swede, "get on to vere ve're goin' vile he's out of sight!"

A rifle cracked behind them at that instant, a long, splintering report from the doorway of the jail. Bender fired a quick glance behind him, and saw that Janey Hansen was taking part in the show with a rifle she had snatched down from the wall.

"Look," cried Hansen, "my Yaney hit 'im. Look, Dave!" His guns started thundering again.

"Watch the two big water barrels across the street!" That was Janey calling to them after her second shot. "At the corner of the stables!"

Bender and Hansen were shooting. The man on the roof leaned forward. Now more lead was tearing into him. In a sudden pitch he came off the roof, head-first, legs twisting crazily until he hit the sidewalk.

"Watch the water barrels!" Janey was

calling again, still shooting steadily. "The rain barrels at the corner of the stables!"

Bender and Hansen hesitated. Heeny would be at the back door of the Standing Wall by this time and expecting them to cover the front. Ignoring the barrels, they raced on, getting to the front door just as the sheriff came in at the rear, finding the scared Jules Gant, white and trembling behind the bar.

"Keep shooting, Janey!" cried Bender. He took a run at those barrels now, leaving Hansen to go on inside and meet the sheriff. Janey's last bullet struck the barrels just three yards ahead of him. There was no one behind the barrels, now. Whoever had been hiding had slipped back inside the stables, evidently for a horse.

Bender heard a quick surge of hoofs. A bullet coming back missed him only by inches as a tall, thin man who was Zane Butler, raced out the rear doorway on a tall bay.

Dave Bender fired and Butler stiffened in his stirrups, stood straight for a moment, then reeled to the right and came down as Bender fired a second shot.

"You got him, Dave!" cried the sheriff, coming out after handcuffing Jules Gant to his own bar-rail. "The other one musta run away!"

"Get a hoss!" yelled Hansen. "We've got to get 'im!"

Bender was already getting himself a horse. The bay had turned back into the hallway, snorting past the man on the ground. In a matter of seconds he had a new rider on his back and was again wheeling away.

THERE were low pines back here. He plowed the bay into them, and snatched to a halt as he caught a glimpse of a rider on a tall sorrel tearing away down a long, curving ravine that would finally bend southward. The thing to do was to short-cut him, and Bender spurred on, angling.

At the end of a mile he was pulling up a couple of rods from the edge of the ravine and crouching behind a pile of rocks and drawfed pines, listening to the sounds of hoofs beating toward him.

It was Breed Jackson, riding like a madman, a six-shooter in his right hand, head turned to watch the ravine behind him. When he was just close enough, Bender jerked to his feet. He fired one barrel of the shotgun, tearing up a cloud of sand and gravel only three yards in front of the racing sorrel, bringing him to a sudden, buck-jumping halt. Jackson went over the horn of the saddle and the horse's head, and fell like a log.

Bender slid rapidly down the ravine. Jackson was unconscious. He turned him over on his face and pulled his hands up behind him. He took off his trouser belt and was securely lashing Jackson's wrists together when Olaf Hansen and old Buck Heeny hit the rim of the ravine on foam-flecked horses.

"Yuh got 'im, alive!" cried the sheriff. "Dave, yuh was born for a sheriff! And you just say the word, and I'll appoint you undersheriff of Buffalo Bow right now! In a week or two I'm gonna quit an' take my wife to California where she won't have to face these hard winters up here no more. Yuh an' Janey can have my house on the rise. Is it a deal?"

"By yimminy, ja, he can have my Yaney!" Olaf Hansen was suddenly laughing all over himself. "Soon as I know 'im, I like Dave. An' I think Sam Bender won't want my scalp no more! Dave, you go tell Yaney vat I say. Me an' Buck vill take the prisoner, eh, Buck?"

"Takin' 'im now!" laughed the sheriff, bouncing from his saddle to the rim of the ravine and sliding down. "Take yore belt, Dave! I've got an' extra pair of handcuffs. Damnit, if you rush like I think yo're goin' to, by the time you hit town you'll be needin' to wear a barrel."

THE END

THE YUMA KID'S LAST SHOT

By
Harrison Colt



"They say you're pretty fast
with your guns."

"Speed ain't enough," the grizzled Yuma Kid said. "You've got to hit what you aim for." He turned away. "And know what you're dying for," he added softly.

IT MUST have seemed queer to some folks to hear him called "Yuma Kid."

But the name had been given him a long time before, twenty years or more, when his hair had been blacker than a crow's belly, his eyes had danced with a devil-be-damned kind of recklessness, and a careless, boyish grin had lurked perpetually at the corners of his mouth. Now, there was more than a touch of grayness at his temples, the recklessness had almost faded from his eyes, replaced by a sharp, tense watchfulness, and his mouth looked

grim and hard, almost as though it had forgotten how to smile.

As he rode with Harvey Yancey into Wagon Wheel, the Kid's mouth seemed grimmer than ever, a pained line across his sun-darkened features. His right hand, through force of habit, hovered close to the butt of the Colt Peacemaker in the strapped-down holster.

Yancey, a short, ample-bellied man with

a round face and bead-like blue eyes under colorless brows, stared about at the dozen or so false-fronted stores and saloons that formed Wagon Wheel's main drag.

"Ain't much of a town," he opined. "I seen more goin's-on in some town's Boot-hills than they got here on the main street."

"It was your idea—comin' here." Yuma Kid's eyes were sharp and keen as he carefully searched both sides of the street. "I had nothin' to do with it."

Yancey gave the rider beside him a mingled glance of surprise and annoyance. "Why in hell d'you keep sayin' that, Kid? Of course, it was my idea to come this way. Things were gettin' pretty hot down there in the Panhandle, what with King Fisher gettin' killed an' all. Anyone with sense would know it was time to hit out for the North."

The Yuma Kid didn't say anything, and a moment later Yancey suggested a stop at one of the saloons to irrigate their dusty throats. "Thank God, they at least got a few saloons," he remarked fervently. "We kin see about hotel rooms later—if they got a hotel."

Yuma didn't feel thirsty. But he dismounted and followed the stout man through the swinging doors of "Pete Johns' Place," as the sign proclaimed it. After downing a single drink, he stood leaning against the bar, his gaze traveling carefully about the room, studying the faces of the other patrons with a peculiar intentness.

Yancey finished his third drink, slapped the glass back on the mahogany, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He stared at the Yuma Kid with puzzled eyes.

"What's the matter with you, Kid? Why ain't you drinkin'? This is good whiskey, for a town this size. What did you expect—Sam Taylor?"

The Yuma Kid gave no sign that he had even heard the other's question. He stared bleakly at the aging, bitter face

under the alkali-whitened black Stetson reflected back at him from the cracked mirror behind the bar. It came over him with a shock how greatly that face had changed in these eleven years. Eleven years! Maybe Nan wouldn't even know him if she saw him now.

The thought of her as he had last seen her, a slim, tall woman with honey-colored hair and a strong self-reliance in the line of her mouth and chin, aroused the deep, long-famished hunger within him once again. And the boy—it was odd to think that young Bill would be nearly a man by now. Eighteen, he'd be!

The Yuma Kid lowered his gaze so that neither Yancey nor any of the others would be able to read the pain and doubt in his dark eyes. The hunger was growing stronger within him, and he had to fight to hold it down. It was an odd thing how strong the desire to see the faces of loved ones could get at times, a hunger of the soul far more devastating than any hunger for food.

Sitting around a lonely campfire or rolled in his blankets under the white glitter of the stars, he had thought of the boy often. That was why he had welcomed Harvey Yancey as a partner. Yancey was all mouth, and his talk helped to keep a man's mind off other things. He tried to think of other things now.

The knowledge that his wife and son were so near, right here in this same town, defeated him finally. Defeated him despite all his vows and resolutions.

He informed Yancey that he had business in town, told the stout man to wait for him, then turned toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Kid," the surprised fat man said. "I'll go with you."

Yuma whirled, his eyes dark and angry. "The hell you will! You stay here and wait for me! And don't go shootin' your mouth off more'n you have to!"

Yancey recoiled, swallowing hard, his eyes respectful. "Sure, Kid, sure. Any-

thin' you say." He turned to the bar.

AS THE Yuma Kid came out of the saloon, his eye caught sight of the two-story brick hotel down the street. He led the two horses to the livery next door, removed his saddlebags and made his way to the hotel lobby.

He signed the register, paid for a room, and went upstairs. Quickly he scrubbed off the dust and grime of the day's ride, shaved, and changed to a clean shirt. He brushed off the black Stetson, and settled it carefully on his graying head. As he was about to leave the room, he remembered the tied-down Peacemaker at his side. For a moment he hesitated. Then, almost reluctantly, he unbuckled the gun-belt and threw it on the bed.

In the lobby, he paused to make inquiries of the hotel clerk.

"Mrs. Nan Yates? Yes, she used to live here in town until a year or so ago," the clerk informed him.

The Yuma Kid felt his heart slide down to his boot-tops. "You mean she isn't here any longer? She's moved."

The man smiled. "Not far. She took a job as house-keeper to old Charley Teague out at Bar Seven."

Yuma breathed easier. "Whereabouts is this Bar Seven?"

"Three miles north of town. Take the main road. It's the second ranchhouse you'll come to. You can't miss it."

The Yuma Kid walked back to the livery. The man who had taken the horses a short while before eyed him sourly. "Changed your mind about stayin' in town?" he asked.

The Yuma Kid shook his head. "No. I just wanted to know if you had a team and a buggy I could rent for the evenin'?"

The liveryman did. A few minutes later, Yuma was heading for the Bar Seven behind a pair of fast-stepping grays. The first dimness of evening was sifting across the rolling prairie land as he turned

into a side road that led to the second ranchhouse.

The man in the buggy let his eyes take in the neat, well-kept house, the freshly-painted barns, the exact-dimensioned flower beds beside the porch. He pulled up the horses, climbed down from the buggy and, stepping up on the porch, knocked at the door.

Presently it opened and a woman stood looking out at him. It was a moment before she recognized him. Then her gray eyes widened and she gave a little gasp.

The Yuma Kid found it hard to keep the emotion from spilling over into his face. He managed to move his stiff lips into an uncertain grin. He said slowly, hesitantly, "Hello, Nan. You look just the same."

After she had recovered from her first surprise, Nan Yates lifted her chin and stared at him with angry eyes. It was a gesture he remembered well. "So you've finally found us?" she said coldly. "I hoped you never would."

The Yuma Kid felt the flush come up into his face. Somehow he had not expected to be greeted with such open hostility. He quickly said, "I'm not here to make any trouble, Nan. If that wasn't so, why would I have stayed away all these years?"

"Because you didn't know where to find us. How did you discover we were here in Wagon Wheel?"

"I've known it right along. Gabe Tully happened to be passin' through these parts the day you and the boy stepped off the stage."

There was a note of disbelief in Nan's voice when she spoke. "Then you've let me alone all this time because you wanted to? I don't believe it!"

A bitter smile formed itself on the man's lips. "You're forgettin' about the letter you left for me in Nogales. I kept readin' it over and over and somehow I knew you were right. It was hell for a

woman to be hitched to a man on the dodge, always movin' from place to place. And what you said—about the boy bein' old enough to know somethin' was queer, and about how he needed a home and a chance to go to school and live like other kids—well, I knew deep inside it was all true. That's why I stayed away."

She looked at him for a long moment in silence. "Then why are you here now?"

The Yuma Kid shifted his feet uneasily. "Me and a friend happened to be passin' this way. At first, I had no intention of botherin' you. It's just—just—"

Her glance was still cool, suspicious. "Yes?"

There was a kind of desperation deep in his eyes. "It's just that a man gets half crazy thinkin' about a son he hasn't seen for eleven years. I thought maybe—"

"You came here to see Bill?"

He nodded. "I figger if I could get just one look at the boy—well, I'd go away and never bother you again."

NAN YATES stared hard at her husband, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her features. She said, her voice suddenly gentle, "After we were here a while, Bill began asking questions about his father. Why he wasn't here like the fathers of the other children in town. I didn't know what to do. So I—I let him think you were dead—"

The Yuma Kid said, "It doesn't matter. All I want is to see him. He doesn't need to know who I am."

The woman hesitated. "Bill isn't here. He rode into town late this afternoon. Besides—" fear flared in the gray eyes— "I don't think it would be wise. He might recognize you. After all, he was seven when he saw you last. A seven year-old might remember. No, I think you better not try to see him."

The Yuma Kid felt a slow anger taking hold of him. He opened his mouth to protest, but the words died on his lips. A

flicker of pain hardened the lines about his mouth. He sighed and started to turn away. He knew Nan was right. She had to keep the boy from finding out what kind of a father he had. . . .

"Reeve!" There was a strange, anguished tone in the woman's voice as she called after him. "Wait—I—"

Yuma turned, a hard question in his eyes. It had given him a queer shock to hear her call him by his first name again. He waited for her to go on.

"Reeve," she said, "I know how cruel and selfish this must sound to you. But can't you see what it might do to him if he should find out, especially now. . . ." Her voice trailed off, little glimpses of worry becoming sharper in her eyes.

He frowned. "What do you mean—especially now?"

Nan Yates looked suddenly wan and tried and her self-reliant air seemed to have vanished, leaving only worry and fear. She darted a swift look at the man's face, then looked away quickly. "I don't know how to say this. But in some respects, Bill is a great deal like you were at his age—reckless, hot-headed, and with a talent for getting himself into trouble. Lately, he's been hanging around with some of the rowdier crowd in town, getting into scrapes. Last week, he got into a quarrel and there was gun-play. The other man was badly wounded, may die. Since then I hardly seem to know my own son—he's changed so. I'm afraid—"

The Yuma Kid broke in. "You're afraid he'll follow in his father's footsteps, is that it?"

"Reeve, what shall I do? He's all I've got!" The sharp anguish in his wife's voice cut into Yuma like a knife.

He sighed. "I reckon you're right. I better not try to see him. Findin' out that his father is the Yuma Kid ain't likely to do him much good right now." After a moment, he added, "I wish there was somethin' I could do. But I guess there

isn't. . . ." He started to turn away.

Nan said, in a choked voice, "No, there isn't. Thanks, Reeve, for understanding what I had to say—and God bless you!"

The Yuma Kid moved slowly down the porch steps to the waiting buggy. There was a heavy burden of bitterness in his heart as he thought of what might have been. If only— He slapped the reins across the rumps of the grays and started back to town. It was too late, even for regret.

DARKNESS had fallen by the time the Yuma Kid reached Wagon Wheel. He left the buggy at the livery, stopped long enough up in his hotel room to take the precaution of strapping on his sixgun, and headed for the saloon where he had left Yancey.

As he stepped inside, he saw that the saloon had filled up with customers during the time he had been gone. A poker game had started up at a large table at one side of the room. Yancey, he saw, was one of the players.

He made his way to the fat man's side and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Harvey," he urged. "Let's get out of here."

Yancey looked up at him, a cheery grin on his round, blunt features. "Hold on, Kid," he said quickly. "What's your hurry? I'm right in the middle of a winnin' streak." He nodded toward the large stacks of red and blue chips before him. "I'd kinda hate to leave just now."

The Yuma Kid felt the need of venting his anger on someone. The fat man happened to be handy. He growled, "Damnit, Yancey! I've had enough of this town! I'm ridin' out of here right now! You comin' or ain't you?"

Yancey shrugged his beefy shoulders regretfully and pushed back his chair, glancing apologetically around at the other players. "Sorry, gents. But I reckon I'll have to cash in my chips. My partner

here—" Then he started to turn away.

It was the player sitting next to Yancey that interrupted him. "What you two gents think you're pullin'?" He had twisted around in his chair and was eyeing the two men suspiciously.

Yancey, on his feet, stared down at him. "I don't get it, friend. What are you drivin' at?"

"You strangers must think we're a lot of fools here in Wagon Wheel. Otherwise, you wouldn't of tried nothin' like this."

"Like what?"

The man waved his hand impatiently. "This old game of givin' yore partner the nod when he's ahead so you kin walk away with most of the money on the table. Well, it won't work here, will it, boys?"

An angry growl of agreement went up from the others at the table. Yancey's eyes narrowed, and he looked around at the faces about the table. Then he lifted his gaze to his partner's face.

The Yuma Kid had been staring hard at the fresh deck of cards in front of the lean man. "What's the matter?" he asked. "You gents afraid you won't have a chance to use this marked deck?" He stepped forward, picked up the top card and indicated the marking with his thumbnail. To Yancey, he said, "Come on. I think you're quittin' just in time. Let's get out of here."

Rage flared in the lean man's face. "Damn you, stranger! Are you tryin' to make us out card-cheats?" He had risen from his chair and was staring at the Yuma Kid with a snarl on his lips.

"I don't need to," pointed out the Kid quietly. "Your own cards have already done that."

The Yuma Kid saw the man's hand stab for his gun. His own reaction was instinctive. Before the other could clear his gun from leather, the Kid's bullet spun him back against the table. It gave

way under his weight, sent a shower of poker chips and playing cards spilling about him as he slid to the floor.

The Yuma Kid blew the smoke from the barrel of his Colt and dropped it back into his holster. "Anybody else lookin' for trouble?" he inquired. For a moment, there was no answer. Then a slender, wide-shouldered young man with a large cream-colored Stetson perched carelessly on the back of his head shoved forward through the crowd. His hair was black as a crow's belly, and a faint anger stirred in his dark, restless eyes as he caught sight of the wounded man on the floor. It was evident that he had just pushed through the batwings and was at a loss to explain what he saw before him.

The Yuma Kid sucked in his breath sharply at sight of him. If it hadn't been for the young man's mouth, he would have sworn he was staring at his own reflection in a mirror some twenty years before.

"What the blazes!" exclaimed the young man. "Who gunned Jake Tinsley?"

One of the players nodded toward the Yuma Kid. "There's the hombre that did it. He and his fat friend there tried to pull a slicker deal on the table and Jake called him on it."

The young man's eyes were brightening with anger and suspicion now. He swung around to face the Yuma Kid. "That true, mister?"

YANCEY grinned and spoke up. "Hold on, kid. Mebbe you don't know who you're talkin' to. This happens to be the Yuma Kid. I reckon you've heard of him?"

A quick murmur of sound moved across the room. Necks craned and eyes peered intently. A man said, "Damn if it ain't! I remember seeing him back in Mexico, four, five years ago. It's the Yuma Kid alright!"

The young man did not seem impressed.

He looked at Yuma, and a devil-may-care recklessness shone in his eyes. There was a glow of quickening excitement and eagerness in their depths. He said slowly, "So you're the Yuma Kid? They say you're pretty fast with your guns."

Yuma's heart hammered in his chest and a sick fear was running along his spine. He could almost read the thoughts going on in the younger man's mind. He had felt that same excitement and eagerness on a night more than twenty years ago, on the night he had tested his skill against a gunman named Pardee and had come out on top. That had been a turning-point in his life. It had meant, inevitably, more killing. It had meant easy money as a hired gunslick for big ranchers in a war against small. It had meant Lincoln County, and Billy the Kid, lonely campfires, and endless haunted trails.

Yuma dampened his dry lips with his tongue. "That's what they say."

The black-haired young man said, "I don't always believe everything I hear. Sometimes I like to find things out for myself. Like now, for instance."

There was an uneasy stir among the spectators. Some men moved toward the batwings; others shifted their positions towards the sides of the room.

Yancey frowned at the young man, a kind of pity in his little blue beads of eyes. "Son," he advised, "I seen a lot of gents who thought they was as fast on the draw as the Kid here. They're Boothill customers now, planted six feet under. Why don't you get some sense?"

The black-haired youth gave no sign he had heard the fat man's plea. He continued to stare at the Yuma Kid with watchful, expectant eyes.

Yuma said, "I got no reason to fight you, Kid. How about havin' a drink and forgettin' the whole thing?"

The young man gazed about him angrily. His eye caught sight of a half-empty whiskey glass standing on the bar.

He moved quickly. Next moment the Yuma Kid stepped back with a startled curse as whiskey stung his face and eyes, dripped from the tip of his nose and his chin.

"I reckon you got a reason now!" snapped the young man.

The Yuma Kid made no reply. He stood there for several seconds, his dark eyes bleak and expressionless. Then he turned and headed for the door. Behind him he left a rising murmur of astonishment.

For a moment he stood on the plank walk in front of the saloon. The batwings creaked and Yancey followed him out into the night. In the pale moonlight, his round face had a pasty, greenish look. There was a harassed disbelief in his voice when he spoke.

"Why the hell'd you do that, Kid? Them folks back in there are gonna think you was scared o' that damned squirt!"

The Yuma Kid didn't say anything at first. Then he said, "I got a room at the hotel. Comin'?"

Yancey stared at the other man, his mouth sagging oddly. After a minute, he said, "No. No, I'm not comin'. I reckon I need a drink. Maybe two, three." He turned and stepped back inside the saloon.

The Yuma Kid walked slowly back to his room at the hotel. He pulled off his boots, hung his gunbelt over a chair, and threw himself on the bed. He lay there thinking, and his thoughts were not pleasant.

After an hour or so, Yancey came in. His footsteps were heavy and stumbling in the darkness. He struck a match, lighted the lamp on the dresser and turned to peer, bleary-eyed, at the man on the bed. The smell of whiskey was strong in the room.

Seeing that the man on the bed was awake, he said, "Damn it to hell, Kid! You oughta hear the kind o' talk that's goin' on back at that damn saloon! It's

enough to make a man sick to his stomach!"

Yuma sat up and stared at his fat partner, but made no comment.

Yancey sputtered on. "Everybody is hangin' around that black-haired kid, slappin' him on the back, buyin' him drinks. They keep sayin' that you backed down because you were scared o' him. And the fool kid actually believes it! They got him believin' he's Hickok, Earp and Ben Thompson rolled into one! I couldn't stand it no longer. I hadda get the hell out o' there."

"He's still over at the saloon then?"

"Yeah. Least he was when I left a couple minutes ago."

The Yuma Kid got into his boots, stood up and buckled the gunbelt around his thin waist. He lifted the gun from its holster, inspected it briefly, then replaced it. There was a grim, tight look to his leathery features under the gray-flecked black hair.

The fat man had been watching him with curious eyes. He said, "What you fixin' to do, Kid?"

"I'm pullin' out of here."

"Tonight?"

"Right now. How about you?"

The fat man looked sobered, and there was a shadow of disappointment in his eyes. He shrugged his bulky shoulders indifferently. "Sure, Kid. I reckon I'll come with you."

THEY aroused the stableman from a sound sleep, paid him off, saddled their horses and a few minutes later were jogging along the road that led northward out of town. It was late September and the night wind held a penetrating, biting chill as it moaned across the flat prairie land. The moon seemed to be playing hide-and-seek with the scudding, fast-flying clouds. The Yuma Kid shivered a little, and yet the chill of the night was only partly responsible.

They rode in silence until they came to the side road leading to the Bar Seven. The Yuma Kid brought his horse to a halt. He pointed to the clump of trees a little further along the road. "Wait for me up there. I don't know how long I'll be. Not too long, I hope."

Yancey blinked at his partner, started to say something, then broke off. He sat for a moment staring after the Yuma Kid as he turned and rode off in the direction of the ranch. Then he gave his shoulders another puzzled shrug and moved along toward the grove of willows.

The ranch buildings loomed blackly and silently out of the night, and the Yuma Kid dismounted and led his horse into the deep shadow beside the barn. Man and horse were swallowed in blackness.

It was another half-hour before the Yuma Kid heard the sound of a horse's hooves on the road. He waited patiently. As the horseman drew up before the barn, he stepped from the obscurity that had concealed him. Pale moonlight made the drawn six-shooter in his hand give off silvery glints.

The rider gave a startled sound and leaned forward slightly in the saddle in an effort to make out the features of the man moving toward him. "You!" he exclaimed. "What the hell do you want?"

"Get down," the man with the gun ordered. "You and me are gonna have a little talk."

The black-haired youth grudgingly did as he was directed, although even the dimness did not completely mask the fury and rage that hardened his boyish features. He waited in sullen silence.

"Feel pretty good about tonight, don't you, son?" asked the Yuma Kid. "Makes you feel pretty big and important to have folks fussin' over you, tellin' you what a brave, fearless gent you are?"

"What's that to you?"

"Nothin' maybe. Let's say I feel a mite sorry for you. It's just that I've seen

so many like you before. Gents that got the notion that they're some new, fancy brand of greased lightnin' with a sixgun. Boothill is full of them. I know—I sent some there personal."

He went on: "And even if you was actually as fast with a gun as you think you are—what then? You'd maybe kill a few men and get a reputation. And then for the rest of your life you'd be runnin' up against wild-eyed gents anxious to bolster their own reps by leavin' you dead or dyin' in a dusty street or on the floor of some stinkin' saloon. What kinda glory is there in that?"

"Mister," broke in the black-haired youth angrily, "why don't you save your breath? If it's preaching I want to hear, I'll go to church come Sunday!"

AS THE Yuma Kid stared at the other's stubborn, resentful features, a sense of despair deepened within him. He knew that it would take more than talk to pierce the hard shell of reckless pride the head-strong youth had erected about himself.

"What I been tellin' you was for your own good. I'm sorry you're too much of a damn fool to listen! Hell, I shouldn't be surprised if you was crazy enough to think I was afraid of you back there in town!"

The moon had disappeared momentarily behind a cloud, and Bill Yates' face was in shadow. But the Yuma Kid sensed the wild fury that convulsed the youth's features, felt the hatred and anger blazing out of him.

"That's the way it looked from where I was sitting, mister!" said the young man hoarsely. "Damn if I think you'd be talking like this if it wasn't for that gun in your hand! Why don't you put it back into the holster? Then we can see who's doing the loud talking 'round here,"

The Yuma Kid forced a grin to his lips, although he didn't feel like grinning.

"I tried to get out of killin' you, but you don't leave me much choice. Looks like you won't be satisfied until I do."

The cloud had passed over now, and pale moonlight fell across the man's figure as he slid the Colt Peacemaker back into the tied-down holster at his side.

"Any time you feel ready—" the Yuma Kid started to say.

He didn't have time to say more. Bill Yates' hand made a sudden swift motion, and the six-gun seemed to leap from his holster. The Yuma Kid's own hand darted downward and came up swiftly. Two pencils of flame stabbed the dimness, and the sound of the two shots blended as one.

Bill Yates cursed and clutched at his right wrist. He swallowed hard and stared down at the blood oozing along his arm. Then he lifted amazed eyes and stared in the direction of the Yuma Kid.

The Yuma Kid had moved back into the deeper shadows near the barn. He growled, "I coulda put that bullet through your heart just as easy. Remember that! And another thing, kid. Bein' fast with a sixgun doesn't mean a damned thing. You gotta hit what you aim at. Take my advice, don't ever get tangled up with a first-rate gun-fighter. He might not be soft-hearted where younkers are concerned!"

Bill Yates had a shocked, crestfallen look on his face. He shook his head slowly. "I guess I was a damn fool. I thought. . . ." He swallowed hard. "Anyway, thanks, mister. It might have been kind of hard on Ma. . . ." He turned suddenly and started at a half-run for the house, where lights now shone in the windows.

* * *

Yancey came riding out of the deep shadow of the willows beside the road. He said, "About time you was comin'. I thought you said—"

He broke off sharply. "Hell, Kid! What's wrong? Is that blood on your shirt?"

The Yuma Kid forced a tight-lipped grin. "That's right, Harvey. I finally ran into a gent who was a mite quicker on the draw than I was. Nothin' the matter with his aim neither."

The fat man stared. He said, in a



The youngster had been plenty fast.

worried voice, "That looks kinda bad, Kid. I reckon we better turn back to Wagon Wheel. You gotta have a doc right away."

Yuma pressed his hand tightly against the pain. "No. There's a town about thirty miles north of here. That'll be time enough to hunt up a sawbones."

Yancey shook his head unhappily. "That's a long way to ride with a bad wound like that. Why don't you want to turn back to Wagon Wheel? It's only a few miles."

"I got a good reason. I don't want nobody around here to know about me bein' hurt."

"Yeah. But maybe you won't be able to make it to that other town!"

"That's all right," said the Yuma Kid. "It doesn't matter much. If I make it, all right. If I don't—I reckon that'll have to be all right, too. . . ."

He grinned again. The pain wasn't so bad, he decided. . . .

ROGUE RIVER

Dramatically Real Western Novel

By Joseph Chadwick



Ed McVey might regain his stolen gold, might win the woman for whom others stole and died. But the whispering lead from Mallard's spiteful guns warned McVey that he could have neither of these . . . without betraying the girl as well as his own steel-bound honor code.

PILGRIM



His eyes glinted with hatred. He threw down and fired.

CHAPTER ONE

Wagon of Death

IN THE inky darkness just before dawn, a wagon and team followed by two riders came along the Palisade road and turned into a lonely gulch. The teamster grunted now and then at his mules, but the horsemen traveled in a

sullen silence that had lasted for hours, and, like thieves in the night, they kept glancing about as though fearing watchful eyes.

The wagon was but lightly loaded, and, once off the road, rattled and banged noisily over the rocky and uneven ground. The racket must have seemed louder than it actually was, for the driver began a

mumbled swearing. Midway through the gulch stood some ramshackle buildings, the shacks of an abandoned gold diggings, and, near this place, the teamster growled, "Dammit; this is far enough." He reined in abruptly.

The riders did not protest. One said, "Yeah; in an hour it'll be daylight," in an edgy voice. The other said sourly, "It'll do. Hank, dump your freight."

The teamster didn't answer at once. He took a bottle from inside his coat, uncorked it, drank deeply. He made strangling sounds, recorked the bottle, stowed it away. "You dump it," he said, "I was only hired to do the driving. The unloading job is yours."

That started one of the riders swearing, but his companion said, "Never mind. We'll do it." They swung alongside the wagon, climbed directly onto it from their saddles. They lifted and flung aside a tarpaulin, uncovering a man. One prodded roughly with a boot-toe, but the man didn't move.

They took hold of him, gripping his arms and his ankles. They handled him like two millhands handle a sack of grain—lifting him, swinging him back, then heaving him forward. The man was catapulted over the side, crashed into some brush and through it. The ground sloped sharply away, and the three could hear him rolling downward. After a moment, the crackling of the brush ended. There was a wet splash.

"Water down there," the teamster said. "He's apt to drown."

"Maybe better so," growled a rider. "Drowned, he can't come back and make trouble."

"Trouble?" the teamster said uneasily. "Who is he, anyway?"

"A cattleman from Oregon, name of McVey," he was told. "But that's something you'd better forget—along with your having made this trip."

The two riders swung their horses

about, rode rapidly out of the gulch. The teamster remained a moment, peering into the darkness that had swallowed the man named McVey. He shuddered. Then he turned his rig, and drove out of there in a hurry. . . .

McVey's first sensation on regaining a measure of consciousness was that of feeling cold. He was terribly cold, colder than he'd ever been in his life. It reached through to the marrow of his bones. He began to shiver uncontrollably, his whole body experiencing one spasm after another until his teeth chattered.

He found himself sprawled face down in some dark, unfamiliar place. There was brush nearby, and his right hand, exploring, touched a sharp rock. He tried to move, then had his next sharp sensation. His left side was numbed. He couldn't move his left arm. It took him some little time to realize that he lay half submerged in icy water, at the edge of a shallow creek.

McVey thought, *How'd I get here?* There was no answer to that. Nor did the answer matter. Getting out of there was the important thing, and for a time it seemed beyond his strength. The odd paralysis in his left side—McVey wasn't sure it was due wholly to cold—thwarted his efforts to move. Finally, however, he closed his right hand about that sharp bit of rock which jutted from the ground. He dragged his body forward a few inches, gasping from the exertion. He got his forearm about the rock, and dragged himself a little farther. The rock was under his chest now, pressing hard. McVey gave a violent heave, flopped over onto his back. He was clear of the stream at last, but half of him was water soaked. The air was chill enough to freeze his wet clothes until they were stiff as boards.

McVey lay gasping, knowing that he must restore his circulation or die. But he couldn't move. There was something wrong with his brain. It was still hazy,

and whatever ailed his brain kept his body from obeying his will.

The only men he had ever seen so helpless were drunks. But he wasn't drunk. He'd had a drink, maybe two, in a Palisade City deadfall. Two drinks wouldn't have done this to him. Unless—*Unless that whiskey was drugged*, McVey thought.

DAWN CAME, but no warming sun. The sky was bleak with rain clouds, and the rain when it came, was a sleety drizzle that chilled McVey even more. He used his right hand to rub, knead and pound his numbed left side. Gradually there was some feeling in his arm and leg. Enough for him to risk trying to move.

He got to his knees, got his feet under him and rose.

His stomach heaved as he came erect, and in his head hammers pounded an avvil. His skull felt split open. McVey knew that he had not been beaten, so accepted it as fact that he had been doped back in that Palisade City deadfall. But he'd think about that later. He still had to save himself. He began to climb the slope. It was but thirty feet, but it seemed that many miles—and McVey was on all fours when he reached its top.

He saw the mine shacks through the drizzle, and for an instant hoped that there would be somebody to help him. Then he noticed that no smoke puffed from the pipe chimneys, that there was no activity at all, and he groaned. He sank down on ice-coated ground, telling himself that in a minute or two, after a rest, he'd make his way to the nearest shack. It would be shelter, at least.

It was longer than a minute or two. It was nearly two hours before McVey roused from his stupor. Some sound had disturbed him, and he recognized it now as the crunching of ice under shod hoofs. He levered himself up on his elbows, and

then a rider came into his range of vision.

He was about to call out, but sudden astonishment held him silent.

The rider was mounted side-saddle. It was a woman.

He was still gaping when the woman saw him. He watched her rein in, dismount, come and bend over him. He almost clutched at her, his relief only slightly less than if she were a man.

"McVey?" she said anxiously. "It's you, McVey?"

He muttered his reply. He could not know that he was unrecognizable. His face was masked with dried mud, ice, blood from brush scratches. The woman gazed at him helplessly for a moment, then grasped his right shoulder with gloved hands. With her help, McVey got to his feet. She turned him toward her horse first, then, realizing that he could not mount, drew his arm about her shoulders. She swayed, then steadied under his weight.

"We'll go to one of those shacks," she told him.

She got him there, but the best of the plank buildings was none too good. Its door hung by one hinge, the pane was broken from the window, there was a steady dripping from the roof. The shack had been a bunkhouse. There was a stone fireplace, a stack of wood beside it. "A fire," McVey said, sinking onto a bunk.

He was shivering again. His teeth chattered.

The woman went to the fireplace. McVey watched her fix chips for tinder and pile thin kindling atop it. She wore a fur-collared short coat over a riding habit—the fashionable riding attire of Eastern women who cantered along park bridle paths. It was ten years since McVey had come West, but he remembered that only the womenfolk of well-to-do men rode and dressed in that style. He began to wonder about this woman. She was young, certainly under thirty. She had gray eyes,

finely molded features, a wide full mouth. What McVey could see of her hair, beneath her small and jaunty hat, was the rich color of bronze. She turned startled eyes toward him.

"Matches?" she said. "I have none."

McVEY FELT in his pockets with frozen fingers. He found half a dozen matches, and knew at once they would not light. They were sodden. The sulphur smeared between his fingers. But the girl took them. She tried, but she could not work miracles. There would be no fire. The knowledge made McVey shiver more violently than ever.

The girl said, "You're turning blue, McVey. You've got to get out of those icy clothes, fire or no fire. I'll get the saddle blanket off my horse." She went out, returned shortly with the blanket. "I'll look in the other buildings for matches," she told him, and went out again.

McVey stripped to flannels and socks, wrapped the blanket about his shoulders. He was stretched out on the bunk when the girl returned, and he was shaking violently. She'd found a piece of canvas which she spread out in front of the hearth. She'd also found some matches in a tobacco pouch some miner had left behind. She lighted the chips.

"Come and lie here," she told him.

McVey obeyed. He had no will of his own. He lay on the canvas, the horse blanket about his shoulders. The girl removed her fur-collared coat and placed it over him. She worried with the fire. Rain had dripped through the roof onto the stacked kindling, and it wouldn't catch properly. It smoked, smouldered, flared up occasionally, but threw little heat. McVey turned his still half numbed left side to it, but felt no warmth. The girl gazed at him anxiously.

"It doesn't help?"

"No. But you've done your best."

She frowned in thought for a moment, then, as though coming to some decision, dropped to her knees beside him. "There's only one way left to try," she said, low-voiced now. She avoided his eyes as she lay beside McVey—close, her body pressing against his shaking person and her arms about him.

McVey was startled. He could feel the rigidity of her at first, then that was gone and she was welded to him with her arms a loose embrace. She was as close as a wife, and the strangeness of it all was her being a stranger. He didn't so much as know her name!

But at the moment none of that mattered. She was lending McVey her warmth, and gradually, as the fire blazed, he felt the numbness leave. He would have died. Now he'd live.

As he became warm, McVey grew drowsy. He fought sleep, however, willed himself not to doze off. He was a lonely man, sharing his life with no woman, and this was an experience he wanted to sample in full measure. He listened to the girl's soft breathing, felt her breath against the back of his neck. Her hair had a fragrance. . . . But even as his senses sharpened thus, McVey's weakness betrayed him. He slept.

When he woke, she was gone. The shack was empty except for himself. But she'd been there. Her coat was proof of that. McVey sat up. His head ached still. His left arm and leg were pricked by myriad pins, the annoying sensation of frostbite. But he was much himself. He was thirsty, he was starving hungry. He found his clothes draped over the tier of bunks nearest the fire, dry now. He reached for them, dressed.

He crossed to the door, shoved it open on its one hinge.

The rain had let up, the sky cleared, and spring was back in the mountains. He saw nothing of the girl who had saved his life. Nor of her horse. He told himself,

Wait; she'll be back. Somehow, he was sure of that.

He left the door open, returned to the fire. His mind was as clear as it ever had been, and he looked back to last night. He'd had a drink, maybe two, in the Oriental House in the mining camp of Palisade City. He'd gotten sleepy, decided to go up to his room. The Oriental was a big place—saloon, gambling-hall honky-tonk, and hotel combined. McVey couldn't quite remember making it upstairs, to the partitioned cubby-hole that passed for a room. . . . *Maybe* he thought, *I never got there.*

CHAPTER TWO

On the End of a Rope

HE'D ARRIVED in Palisade only that morning, with thirty head of cattle out of a herd of four hundred that he'd trailed down from the Rogue River country. He'd sold bunches of the beef cattle at the California gold camps and diggings along the way—for dust. At Palisade he'd paid off the four men who'd helped him with the drive through the mountains. He'd gone to the Wells Fargo office and exchanged his dust for fifty-dollar gold slugs—about sixteen thousand dollars worth—after selling those last thirty head and settling with his men.

He'd had his money in a pair of saddlebags, which he'd carried slung over his shoulder. He'd felt safe enough. Most men in a mining camp carried large amounts of dust or money about on their person. Besides, he'd had a Colt revolver in the waistband of his jeans. But a gun had been no defense against a drugged drink. . . . Somebody had seen his saddlebags, guessed what they contained, and knew exactly how to get hold of them. The bartender who served his drink had been in on it. *He'll do to start with*, McVey told himself.

He was going back to Palisade City. The men who robbed him had dumped him far enough away from that town, maybe considering him dead or dying—or maybe sure that he'd have too much fear in him to return. Either way, they'd guessed wrong. . . .

McVey kept the fire blazing. He made numerous trips to the door, sometimes stepping outside to look out the gulch in the hope of seeing the girl returning. He went to the creek, finally, where it wound past the rickety buildings, slacked his thirst and washed up. As he turned back, he saw her coming in through the gulch's narrow rock-walled entrance.

McVey's pulse began to race, and he experienced an upsurge of feelings.

He was so intent upon watching her that he was only vaguely aware that there was a small skillet, a coffee pot and a flour sack of grub tied to her saddle. He helped her dismount, but she drew sharply away from him the moment her boots touched the ground.

"You shouldn't have gone without your coat, he told her.

"It's not cold now," she replied. "Besides, I wanted you to know that I'd be back. I rode to some diggings farther back in the hills, and the men there furnished me with some food."

"This is a lot to do for a man—for a stranger."

"I want you in my debt," she told him. "But we'll talk about that after we've eaten."

He carried the cooking utensils and grub inside, then sat on the edge of the bunk and watched her prepare the meal. She had beans, bacon and coffee, tin cups and plates and knives in the sack. She was deft at cooking, and McVey found that having a woman fix a meal for him was pleasant indeed. But he was wrong about her in one way. Her eyes weren't exactly gray. They were green-gray. And chill. Her lips were unsmiling. McVey

wondered how he had considered her warm.

"My name is McVey," he said. "Ed McVey."

"I know," she told him, not looking up. "You tell me that so I'll tell you my name. Well, it's Katherine Martin. I'm from Palisade City. I've lived there for nearly a year—except for the winter months, which I spent in Sacramento."

"You live there alone?"

"Yes. Since my husband . . ." there was a break in her voice. Since he died. That was in February."

McVey fell silent. He frowned thoughtfully. This was April, close to the end of the month, so she hadn't been a widow long. He began to understand that chill look in her eyes. With her widowhood of so short a duration, she could have no warmth in her for a man. McVey suddenly understood something more. She wanted to make use of him.

"My husband was killed," she said thickly.

"Murdered, you mean?"

"He was hanged. By a mob of infuriated miners."

"I'm sorry," McVey said.

She looked at him now, a world of bitterness in her, "Sorry," she said, "That's an empty word." She shook her head. "Don't mind me. I'm not pleasant company. We'll eat now, and then talk."

IT WAS McVey who ate. Katherine hardly touched her share of the food. Finally, when he had enough, she said, "You were robbed last night. My house is near the Oriental. I couldn't sleep last night, so I worked. You see, my husband's death left me without money. I earn my livelihood now by sewing. I'm handy at it. I patch clothes for miners, make shirts for them. And coats out of," she smiled faintly, "blankets and canvas. Not many men here in the mountains own mackinaws like yours, clothes are hard to get in

the mining camps, and very costly."

McVey nodded. "I once owned a blanket-lined canvas coat," he said. "These miners pay you well?"

"Very well," Katherine replied. "Perhaps because they pity me. Perhaps because their consciences bother them, and they feel guilty about my husband. . . . But I was working late last night. It was about midnight. I heard a wagon pass the back of my house. And furtive voices. I was curious. I went to my kitchen window and looked out. The wagon stopped at the rear of the Oriental. I recognized the driver as old Hank Eberts. There were two saddled horses waiting. . . ."

McVey listened intently, at last learning what had happened to himself. Two men had come out dragging a third man. Katherine had recognized the third man as the man who had arrived in Palisade just that day with some cattle. She'd seen him lifted into the wagon, covered with a tarpaulin, and taken away. She'd guessed what had happened. She had seen McVey that afternoon come out of the Wells Fargo office with his laden saddlebags, and had known that they contained money. She had watched for Hank Eberts to return, and he had gotten back to Palisade about an hour after daybreak—coming in alone. She had questioned him.

"He was frightened when I told him what I'd seen," Katherine said. "He denied it all, at first, but finally told me where they'd taken you. I changed into my riding clothes, got a horse at the livery barn, and came here to Flat Nugget Gulch."

"Lucky for me that you did," said McVey. "But why did you bother?"

"I wanted something of you," she replied. "I thought that if I helped you, you would feel indebted enough to me to do something that—well, that a woman can't do."

McVey saw that her face was suddenly pale, her eyes colder than ever. Her

hands were tightly clasped. "Go on," he said.

"Maybe I'm wrong about you. Maybe you're not the man I hope."

"I pay my debts, Katherine."

"Maybe you won't pay this one. I want you to—to kill a man."

McVey stared, jolted.

He looked into those green-flecked eyes and saw that she meant exactly what she said. She hated some man so much that she wanted him dead. Wanted him killed! McVey, who had been warmed by her so short a time ago, now shuddered.

"I'm no killer, Katherine," he said flatly.

"I'll help you get back the money you lost," she said, facing him squarely. Her pallor increased, leaving her face startlingly white. "And I'll pay more. Not in money, for I have none. But in the only other coin a woman has to offer!"

McVEY WAS jolted still more; killing a man meant that much to her. Suddenly McVey knew that he wanted her, but not on those terms. He said, "That's no good, Katherine. You're not like that, no matter how much you try to think so. Why? What's this all about? Who is this man?"

She stood rigid before him, but now she began to wilt. She had tried to win him over, tried with what means a woman had, and now that she had lost her slight hold on him, she looked deeply shaken. And perhaps ashamed. Her eyes avoided him. She turned her head.

"What's the use of talking about it if you won't do as I ask? I'll go now. I won't beg!"

"I'd do anything for you, Katherine. Anything but that."

"There isn't anything else I want of you."

"You'll try to find somebody else, then?" he said coldly. When she did not

reply, he caught her roughly by the arms and forced her about. He saw tears in her eyes. "It's no good, Katherine," he told her. "Hating won't make you forget a wrong. And a man's death won't bring you any peace of mind."

"You can't know!" she cried. "I see him every day—and all I can think is *you murdered my husband!* He knows that I know, yet he has the nerve to—to want me! He thinks that in time I'll forget and—"

"You said a mob of infuriated miners killed your husband," McVey broke in. "Now you say it's this one man."

"He was to blame!"

"Go on, Katherine. Tell it!"

She said brokenly, "All right. I may as well tell it—once. I've kept it locked up in me too long. His name is Clint Mallard—"

"Mallard," McVey muttered. The name struck a chord in his memory. A man had come up to him in the Oriental, and said, "My name's Mallard. I'm part owner of the Oriental." He'd tried to get a conversation going, but McVey never felt friendly toward strangers. Mallard had gone away finally, and one of the Oriental's percentage girls had come to his table. She'd tried to pump him, asked him all sorts of questions about himself—how long he was staying in Palisade, where was he going when he left. She'd urged him to have a drink with her. . . . McVey remembered now. He had taken two drinks—one alone, one with the girl. He was frowning when he told Katherine, "I met Mallard in the Oriental."

"He was my husband's partner," she said slowly. "They started an express and banking company, when Palisade sprang up after gold was discovered there. My husband, Richard Martin, had been a banker back home—in Boston. The bank failed, and he lost everything. Even his reputation. He wasn't young, he was nearly twenty years older than I.

It was hard for him to make a new start at home, so he decided to come to California. That was three years ago.

"He didn't have much luck until he met Cleve Mallard. They started up their express and banking company. They prospered because neither Wells Fargo or Adams & Company had opened an office in Palisade. Richard sent for me. I was here with him until winter set in, then he sent me to Sacramento—so I'd be more comfortable. Then in February Adams & Company failed."

McVey nodded. He remembered February 1855, all right.

He'd just started driving his herd south from Rogue River when the word spread through Oregon. He'd had five thousand dollars—all he possessed in the world, except for the cattle which were only partly paid for—on deposit with Adams & Company. The money was lost in the failure of the express firm. No, McVey would never forget.

Katherine was saying, tonelessly, "It was a financial panic. I saw a riot at Adams & Company's office in Sacramento. Business houses failed. Thousands of men in the mining country lost all the dust they'd entrusted to Adams & Company. Wells Fargo didn't close its door, anywhere. But some of the little express companies did. My husband's firm did. Now Wells Fargo is located in his old building."

She paused, choked up. Then, recovering, she continued, "It was called the Martin Express Company. Clint Mallard was—well, a silent partner. For reasons of his own. When word of the panic reached Palisade, my husband had just left to come to Sacramento for me. . . ."

McVey was so intent that her words formed the ugly picture for him.

HE COULD see Richard Martin riding away from Palisade, along the mountain trail, unaware of disaster—an-

icipating the reunion with his young wife. He'd not known his danger when a posse of angry miners overtook him. They'd taken him back to Palisade, demanded that he open his office and give them back all the dust they paid him to store. . . . Martin had been surprised to find his office locked up, the clerk he'd left in charge vanished. And his strong-box empty.

"They gave him no chance to find out what had happened," Katherine said dully. "Some were drunk, all were wild with anger. They hanged him—an innocent man."

"And Clint Mallard?"

"He didn't speak a word in Richard's defense," she said. "He stood back and let it happen. I came back to Palisade when word reached me. I patched things together, knew what had happened. My husband wasn't a strong man, Ed, but he was honest!" She said that fiercely, as though McVey might doubt it. "His firm had no reason to fail like the others. But Clint Mallard saw his chance. He got rid of the clerk, somehow, and looted the the strong-box of thousands of dollars worth of dust!"

McVey nodded. "I understand now," he said gently.

Katherine shook her head. "You can't understand completely," she said. "Not how I feel—how I hate Clint Mallard. He betrayed a man who was decent and good, then murdered him!"

She turned from McVey, stood gazing blankly into the fire. "I accused him," she said bleakly. "He laughed at me. He tried to make love to me. He said that my husband had been too old for me. He's a vain fool, or he'd know how much I hate him. I respected and liked my husband greatly, and it didn't matter that I wasn't madly in love with him. I married him because my family wished it, and he did his best to make me happy. I

owe him something. I owe it to him, McVey, to punish Clint Mallard!"

"He wouldn't want you to do what's in your mind," McVey told her. "You'll find some man fool enough to kill Mallard for you, if you offer enough. But don't, Katherine. Don't do it!"

She did not reply to that. She picked up her coat, turned to the door.

McVey said quickly, "Wait. There may be a way besides killing him."

Katherine halted, faced him.

"I'm going back to Palisade for my money," McVey said. "I think a girl and a bartender at the Oriental had a small part in robbing me. One or both of them may talk. Besides, there's Hank Eberts and those two riders you saw. They were all paid for the job by the man who planned it—and I've got reason to believe that man was Clint Mallard."

"And if it was he?" Katherine asked.

"I'll tackle Mallard," McVey told her. "It'll be no harder to make him confess to two crimes than to one. And if he admits looting the Martin Express Company—well, the Palisade miners will be glad to take care of him!"

CHAPTER THREE

Dark Ambush

ONCE THE girl had ridden away, McVey felt loneliness take hold of him. For the first time, he realized that he led a lonely life. And it would be lonelier still, for his having known Katherine Martin. But he was to see her again. They had made their plans before she left. He was to come to Palisade tonight, to her house, and she would help him gather evidence against the man who had been behind the theft of his money.

It was nine miles to the town, she had told McVey. He would start out from Flat Nugget Gulch late in the afternoon. It would take him until well after dark to

walk the nine miles, and darkness would permit him to enter Palisade safely. McVey had no doubts about the danger. His return to Palisade City would mark him as dangerous to certain men, and they certainly wouldn't give him a free hand. A bullet in the back—if they got the chance—would be more like it.

McVey entered the town, a sprawling camp of tents and shacks and a few plank buildings, about eight o'clock. He avoided its crooked main street, moved around the rear of a hodge-podge of rickety shelters. The houses and buildings were a bit more substantial in the center of town, and Katherine's house, close to the big Oriental House, was the one tidy place. Richard Martin had had it painted for her, white with green trimmings, like a New England house, and so McVey scarcely noticed that it was box-shaped and plank-walled. The kitchen window was curtained. Katherine had said, "There'll be no lights if it's safe for you."

The kitchen window was dark. McVey picked his way toward the door.

Not far away, a bottle kicked by somebody's boot, rattled emptily. There was a shed some distance behind the Oriental, a storage place of some kind. It was within full view from the rear of Katherine Martin's kitchen. Somebody was there, in the dark, and the person had bumped that bottle by accident. McVey wondered if he was merely jumpy, or if somebody was watching the girl's house.

He'd approached silently, and was still in deep shadows. It was possible that his presence wasn't yet noted. He lowered to a crouch, moved away from the house, circled toward the shed. He now had the small building between himself and the lamplighted rear windows of the Oriental House. He paused, waited, keeping low to the ground. Minutes passed before he saw a man restlessly shift his position. The man stood at the rear of the shed, at the corner that permitted him to

watch the back of Katherine's little house.

McVey edged forward. He was within ten feet of him when the fellow sensed his presence and slowly turned. McVey came erect, drove forward on his boot toes. He had a glimpse of a dark, lank face—squinty eyes, a hooked nose, a thin-lipped mouth. The man grabbed at his holstered gun, his eyes peering hard at McVey.

"Stace?" he gasped. "That you, Stace?"

McVey hit him, then, just below the belt. It was a vicious blow, with McVey's whole weight behind it, that doubled the man over. He gasped in a strangling fashion as the breath was knocked out of him. But he got his gun out, jabbed its muzzle against McVey's stomach. McVey hit him again, at the base of the skull, and he collapsed at McVey's feet. He'd dropped the gun, and McVey stooped for it.

A DOOR opened somewhere. At the rear of the Oriental, McVey supposed. A man called out in a cautious voice, "Anything yet, Hook?"

McVey's hand tightened on the gun.

He made up his mind in a hurry. He didn't want that second man back there, to see what had happened to Hook. "Nothing yet, Stace," he called, mumbling the words. "Better keep quiet, though."

The door closed, and McVey breathed again.

Hook was still unconscious. McVey stepped over him, moved away from the shed. He saw no one about the Oriental, so he crossed to the girl's house. He knocked softly, and the door opened almost at once. He said, "Ed, Katherine," and slipped the gun into the deep side pocket of his mackinaw. Her hand gripped his arm, drew him inside. She closed the door and put its bar in place. They were close, there in the darkness, so close McVey had only to lift his arms.

He was rough, pulling Katherine against him, and she gasped. Her body

stiffened, then the rigidity left her and she was pliant enough. McVey's lips found her mouth, but it was not all he had anticipated. She merely submitted, she did not respond. McVey released her abruptly. She stood there—waiting, it seemed—not speaking. Her silence however told McVey that it was up to him. That she would keep her part of the bargain if he demanded it of her. But there was a shadow between them, her memory of Richard Martin, and McVey knew it. He was half angry, half inclined to be gentle with her.

"You promised to get me a gun," he said. "I won't need it now. I picked one up, just outside. There was a man watching your back door. A man called Hook."

"Hook Valmer!" Katherine exclaimed. "He was one of the pair, Ed. The other was Stace Black. They're both hardcases. They hang about the Oriental."

"Mallard's men?"

"It's possible. Yes, they would be—if he paid their price."

"You saw Hank Eberts and learned something about who hired him?"

McVey could see her shake her head, and he thought that her eyes were frightened. "He works at the livery barn," she said, "but he wasn't there when I got back. And I was afraid to hunt for him. You see, Clint Mallard was waiting for me. He stopped me as I came from turning in my horse. I think he knew where I'd been."

"Hank told him that you'd asked questions about me?"

"It must have been that," she replied. "Mallard frightened me—the way he looked at me. All he said was, 'Did you have a nice ride?' But the way he said it. . . ."

McVey nodded jerkily, uneasiness in him. This Clint Mallard was shrewd, and quick to act. He'd guessed why she'd ridden from town after questioning Hank Eberts. He'd know that she was hunt-

ing an ally. He had the man Hook spying on her, because he anticipated McVey's coming to her house. McVey didn't like it.

"He's set a trap for me," he said flatly, "and he'll spring it once Hook comes to and reports what happened to him."

"What will we do now, Ed?"

"I'll clear out of here, so you'll be safe."

"Mallard won't harm me," Katherine said. "I told you that—that he wants me. It's you who is in danger!"

McVey wished there was light. He wanted to look at her, and see if some of the chill had gone from her eyes. Her voice just now had been charged with feeling, as though she were genuinely concerned about him. He said, "I'll try to get the jump on Mallard, before he can spring his trap. If I settle with him, what then?"

"I'll be waiting for you."

"All right," said McVey, and turned to the door.

As he went out, Katherine said huskily, "Ed, wait!" But he couldn't turn back. A man was moving at a stumbling run toward the Oriental's back door. It was Hook Valmer going to report. McVey ducked around the far side of Katherine's house.

HE STILL had no plan, other than to confront Clint Mallard. Alone. It had to be alone. McVey didn't want the odds stacked against him at the showdown. He would have to wait until Mallard's guard was down—until he didn't have Hook and Stace handy. The thing to do was to let those three worry about his—McVey's—whereabouts. Then, as they searched for him, as they surely would, he could find a way to get a Mallard.

McVey turned north along Palisade's crooked street. There were men about—townsmen and those in from the diggings—but they had no interest in him. He

strode away from the Oriental's location, past a long stretch of shacks and tents, and came to Glennon's livery barn.

Glennon wasn't about, but a hostler sat dozing on a bench in the cubby-hole office. McVey shook him awake. "I've got a horse here," he said. "A dun gelding. I'm taking it out."

The hostler was a stooped little man with a hunger-pinched face.

He mumbled, "All right," and reached for his lantern.

Following him into the barn, McVey remembered Katherine saying that Hank Eberts worked here. He said, "Your name Hank Eberts?"

The man shook his head. "Will Young," he said. He held the lantern high, peered into the stalls. "That your dun?"

McVey nodded. He went into the stall, patted the dun and talked to it. An Oregon horse, McVey had caught it running wild two years before. Its saddle and bridle were on the stall side, and he began saddling up. The hostler held the lantern up for him. When he backed the horse from the stall, McVey said, "You know where I can find Hank?"

"He took a trip."

"Where does he go when he takes a trip?"

"I don't know."

McVey saw how the man's eyes slid away. He felt in his pockets, found a small handful of silver coins in his mackinaw pocket. He clinked two silver dollars together, suggestively. "Where, Will?" he said.

The hostler frowned, rubbed his bristly chin. "Hank said not to tell anybody, but I didn't promise," he said. "He got hold of some money, somehow, and said he figured on going down to Sacramento for some fun. He rode over to Trinity, to catch the stage. But I figure he'll just stay in Trinity. He's got a brother there—" Will Young paused for breath, a talker once he was started. "A brother

named Chris. Smarter than Hank, Chris is. Started a store over at Trinity about a month ago, after he lost his job as clerk for the Martin Express Company. You hear about what happened to that outfit?"

McVey said, "I heard," and handed over the two silver dollars.

That left him without money enough for a meal, but it was a good investment. It had bought an idea, a plan. Chris Eberts, Hank's brother, was the clerk who had been left in charge of the express office by Richard Martin—and who had mysteriously vanished when Martin was brought back off the trail by the posse of miners. Chris Eberts had needed money to open his Trinity store, and without a doubt he'd come by it through the looting of the express company's strong-box McVey swung to the saddle and rode from the barn.

He had meant to have the dun ready for a quick getaway, in case he was forced to make a run for it. But now he was going to ride to Trinity, for a talk with the Eberts brothers!

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Girl Will Die!"

IT WAS but seven miles through the mountains, and McVey had been to Trinity before coming to Palisade. He had sold fifty head of cattle there. It was a bigger camp than Palisade. . . .

His horse was blowing hard when he rode in. He'd covered the seven miles in less than an hour. He located Chris Eberts' store by its crudely painted sign. It was a small plank building cluttered with general merchandise. It was open for business, due to there being a measure of trade at night when the miners came in from their diggings.

McVey waited until no customers were inside, then he entered and closed the

door. There was no lock, but iron sockets took a stout wooden bar. McVey found the bar in a corner and swiftly fitted it in place. He reached up, turned down the wick of the front ceiling lamp. The storekeeper gaped at him, and now came blustering from behind his counter.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "What'd you think you're doing?"

"You're Chris Eberts?"

"I am, and I'm owner of this store. Dammit, what—"

McVey had drawn his gun. It and the rocky look on McVey's face kept Eberts quiet, though the man looked as though he wanted to scream for help. Chris Eberts was a lean man with a trimmed beard and shrewd black eyes. McVey judged him to be about fifty-five—and a man who had reached that age by sidestepping trouble. Eberts was nervous.

"A hold-up?" he said thickly.

"More than that, Chris," McVey told him. "Where's Hank?"

"In my office at the back, sleeping off a drunk," Chris said, suddenly relieved. "If you're just after him, you won't have trouble with me."

McVey gestured with the gun. "Let's go back there," he said.

Hank Eberts was hard to wake, but he sobered quickly on seeing McVey. He'd been sprawled on a cot at the back of the room. He sat up and stared. He was heavier, this brother, and not so shrewd looking. His whiskers were a rust red and badly matted. His seedy clothes smelled of Glennon's livery barn.

"You?" he muttered.

"Who paid you to haul me to Flat Nugget Gulch, Hank?"

"Now, look; it'll go hard with me if I talk."

McVey motioned with his gun. "Harder if you don't," he said. "Chris, write down on paper what Hank says. He'll sign it, then."

Hank protested some more, but finally

admitted that Clint Mallard had paid him fifty dollars. Mallard had given him fifty more for reporting how Mrs. Martin questioned him. "He'll kill me for this," Hank said chokingly. "He told me to get out of town, so you couldn't find me."

"He won't bother you, once I'm done with him. Sign here, Hank."

McVey pocketed the paper after Hank had scrawled his name, then swung his gun toward Chris Eberts. "Your turn," he said. "Start writing again. Tell how you got the money to start up as a storekeeper."

Chris' mouth fell agape. "You," he gasped. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm the man who knows what really happened to the dust in the Martin Express Company's strong-box," McVey stated. "Clint Mallard stole it, but you got a share."

Chris gasped. Fear crawled into his eyes. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. "No, McVey!" he said, almost yelling it. "You've got it wrong! I had no part in that!"

McVey cocked his gun. The metallic click made Chris jump.

He squirmed like a man sitting on a tack. "I'm innocent, McVey. I swear it. Clint Mallard gave me five thousand dollars to leave Palisade. It was the same day Martin started for Sacramento. The strong-box was locked when I left, but Mallard took the key from me. He—"

"Put it on paper, Chris," McVey ordered.

He smiled thinly, as though enjoying himself a little.

IT HAD taken but a few minutes, and it had been easier than McVey expected. But riding back toward Palisade City, letting his dun take it easy this time, McVey knew that rest of the job wouldn't be so simple. There was no law except occasional vigilante law here in these isolated mining camps, so he couldn't take

the Eberts brothers' depositions to a peace officer and have Clint Mallard arrested. He would have to finish it alone, and Mallard had those two hardcases, Hook Valmer and Stace Black, and maybe others, to side him.

McVey knew that he would have to buck the odds, now or later, unless he wanted to back down. And he wasn't backing down.

It was close to midnight when he came within sight of the scattered lights of Palisade City. He passed some half drunk miners returning to their claims and, farther on, a couple of pigtailed Chinamen heading for some lonely diggings after a visit to some fan-tan den. Short of the camp, he reined in and examined the loads in the Colt revolver he'd taken from Hook Valmer. All six chambers were loaded.

He thrust the heavy weapon into his waistband, and rode directly to the front of the Oriental House. The place was still going full blast. Music, guitar and fiddle music, came from inside. McVey could hear the stamping of boots and louder laughter of miners dancing with the house girls. From the saddle, he could see over the swing doors. The bar was lined, the gambling tables busy.

He dismounted, left the dun ground-hitched.

There were a few horses and some mules at the hitch-rack, so the chances were that he would be pursued if he had to make a getaway. He thought about driving those animals off, but the almost constant flow of men in and out of the place decided him against it.

He glanced at Katherine's house, found its windows still dark.

He wondered if she were abed and asleep, or awake and wondering—and maybe a little worried. He wondered too if he would hold her to their bargain if he managed to settle things with Clint Mallard. Or if he would merely say, "You

owe me nothing," and ride out for Oregon.

He thought, "*I don't know*," and walked into the Oriental.

He saw Clint Mallard at once, at the far end of the long bar. McVey glanced over the throng. He judged there was more than two hundred men—miners, freighters, townsmen—in the place. He saw nothing of Hook Valmer. And he didn't know Stace Black by sight. He did see the red-faced bartender, however, who had served him the doped drink. He was one of three behind the bar, and, busy with his work, did not notice McVey. The girl was at a table near the dance floor, with two miners, a pretty thing except for the hardness of her eyes and the brassiness of her dyed hair. McVey looked back at Clint Mallard.

Mallard was lighting a cheroot—and watching him.

His dark eyes narrowed down, but otherwise the expression on his sallow, half handsome face did not change.

McVey made his way along the bar. As he neared Mallard, he noticed the blonde girl rise and, a startled look in her eyes, move as though to intercept him. A look from Mallard stopped her short. His dark gaze returned to McVey, and he said, "So you're back. I thought you'd started back to Oregon."

"You know better than that, Mallard."

"I do? How so?"

"I was doped and robbed here last night," McVey said flatly. "I was hauled up to Flat Nugget Gulch, and dumped out of a wagon. No need to tell you that, Mallard. You were in on it. It was your game. I've just come from Trinity, where I talked to Hank Eberts."

"A liar, that Hank."

"And his brother Chris too, Mallard?" McVey asked.

He could see that hit home. A muscle at the corner of Mallard's mouth twitched.

The man frowned. He looked as though he could think of nothing to say, but finally muttered, "Come into my office."

IT WAS a room off the rear of the big barroom, comfortably furnished with carpet and armchairs as well as a desk. Mallard told McVey to sit down, but he stood with his back against the closed door. McVey heard somebody brush against the outside of the door, and he guessed that somebody who obeyed Mallard's orders had posted himself there in case help was needed inside. Mallard sat at his desk, puffing at his cheroot. He was still frowning, but he didn't look unsure of himself.

"You mentioned Chris Eberts," he said finally.

"He told me what really happened to the Martin Express Company."

"Chris only worked for the firm a month or two," Mallard said. "Martin broke him in to take charge while he went to Sacramento. Chris couldn't know the company was in a bad way."

"Your word against his," McVey said. "But I'm not worrying about the Martin outfit, at the moment. I want my saddlebags, Mallard—and the money that was in them."

"You've come to the wrong man, McVey."

"Your word against Hank Eberts, now," said McVey. "Part of that money belongs to some Oregon ranchers. I got cattle from them without paying the full price. They trusted me. They're waiting for me to come back to Oregon and pay them what I owe. I swear, Mallard, that I'll shoot you dead rather than walk out of here empty-handed."

"That won't get you your money, friend."

"There's a strong-box over in the corner, Mallard."

"If you think your money is there. . . ."

"Let's have a look," McVey suggested.

Mallard hesitated, then shrugged and went to the iron chest. He opened it with a key from his pocket. He reached inside, hauled out McVey's saddle-bags, flung them to the floor at McVey's feet. McVey heard the musical clink of gold slugs. Mallard turned to him with a thin smile.

"I sized you up wrong, McVey," he said. "I figured there was enough drug in your drink to make you too sick to come back. Your money's there, every dollar of it." He smiled again. "You got drunk here in the Oriental last night—dead drunk. It wasn't safe to let you wander around with all that money, so I took charge of it until you sobered up. Can you prove anything else, McVey?"

"A bullet in your guts, Mallard, won't need anything proved."

"I've been expecting that," Mallard said. "I'm not even going to warn you that you'd never leave here alive if you harm me. You're the kind that doesn't heed warnings that concern yourself. But there's somebody else involved."

"Meaning what?" asked McVey, picking up the heavy saddle-bags.

"The girl, McVey. The one who followed you to Flat Nugget Gulch."

"What's she got to do with it?"

"Everything, now," Mallard told him. "She teamed up with you, hoping that you would settle with me for what happened to her husband. I understand women, McVey. Katherine Martin blames me for what happened, and she hates my guts. She'll get over that, in time. But right now—" He paused to relight his cheroot. "Right now, you're the problem."

McVey had to admit that the man was a cool one.

He'd let himself be shown up as a liar and a thief without making a fight of it. Clint Mallard made his way by his wits, and it was clear that he was counting on out-smarting McVey. He got the cheroot

burning again. He puffed at it calmly.

"What did she want of you?" he asked. "Proof that I looted the Martin Express Company?"

"She wanted me to kill you, Mallard."

"So? And in return, she offered you—what?"

"I guess you know. You claim to understand women."

Mallard nodded. He was frowning again, and his eyes turned ugly. For the first time, he was close to losing his temper. "She made a mistake in that," he said flatly. "She knows I've wanted her from the first day she came to Palisade. I'm no fool, McVey. I've been thinking ahead of her all along. As for you—"

McVey cut in, "If you had guts enough to face me with a gun, I'd kill you willingly." His voice was harsh, his own temper flaring. "But there's another way to smash you—one that won't be murder on my part. I'm going outside and tell those miners—the men who hanged Richard Martin—who really got their dust!"

He reached behind him to open the door.

Mallard's voice jumped out at him. "Wait, you fool!"

"Wait—for what? For more of your smooth, lying talk?"

"You want the girl, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"You won't get her by ruining me," Mallard said wildly. "She's gone, McVey. Two of my men took her away after I got word that you were back in town. They've orders, McVey. Orders they'll carry out if anything happens to me. I'm offering you a deal. Clear out of Palisade, go back to Oregon, and she'll be safe. You've got back your money. There's nothing else here to interest you—is there?"

McVey took one quick step forward. He couldn't control his rage. He swung his gun up, crashed the barrel down upon

Mallard's head. It was a terrific blow, and Mallard collapsed as though dead. McVey bent over him, found that he was still breathing. "I'll be back, damn you," he muttered. "So help me, I'll be back!"

HE SWUNG to the door, jerked it open, glimpsed the percentage girl—the one with the brassy hair, who had urged that drugged drink on him—moving quickly away. He pulled the door closed, strode from the Oriental, went to Katherine's house. The front door was locked, so he went around back. He found the kitchen door unlocked, and he called her name as he entered. There was no answer.

Fumbling about, he found matches and lighted a lamp. He carried it into the other rooms, the neat parlor and the bedroom. They were empty. McVey stood there at the bedroom doorway, sharply aware of its emptiness. He could smell perfume. He saw that the bed covers were turned back, and that a silken nightdress lay across the foot of the bed. She hadn't gone to bed. She'd been waiting. And it hadn't been he, but Mallard's toughs who came to her door.

He heard the sound of light footsteps in the kitchen.

He said, "Katherine?" a vast relief in him.

It faded when he saw that it was the girl from the Oriental. "It's no use looking here," she said tonelessly. "They've taken her away. Clint Mallard didn't lie about that. How badly do you want her, McVey?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Look. I'll make a bargain with you," she went on, with a rush of words. "I'll tell you where she is, if you'll give me your word that you'll take her to Oregon with you."

"All right. I'll promise that—or anything!"

"You've got to swear to it," the girl

said, fiercely. "I want her away from Palisade. I was Clint Mallard's girl up until he lost his head over her. He's rotten, and he's made me do some of his dirty work—but I love him and want him back. You'll swear that you'll take her away?"

"You have my word for it."

"And you'll not harm Clint? You'll let him come back to me?"

McVey knew now that Katherine had been right. Clint Mallard needed killing just as a mad dog needed killing. But her safety was all that mattered now. He said, "I'll ride out as soon as you tell me where she is. I won't come back here. I give you my word, and you've got to take it!"

The girl said, "I don't know what he'll do to me if he finds out I've told you. But Hook Valmer and Stace Black took her up to that same gulch. Clint figured it would be a safe hiding-place—that you wouldn't suspect them of using Flat Nugget Gulch a second time."

McVey stepped past her, set the lamp on the table.

He went out, ran around to the street. He tied the saddle-bags in place, swung to the saddle and rode straight out of Palisade City, keeping his word to the girl. There was a long, hard nine miles ahead of him and the dun.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Go for Your Gun!"

THERE was a smell of wood smoke. A shower of red sparks shot out of the chimney as somebody stirred up the fire. It was the same shack, the one in which Ed McVey had spent a strange three or four hours with Katherine Martin. The ruddy glare of the fire showed through cracks in the plank wall and around the edges of the door that hung by one hinge. The window was covered

over by a thick piece of canvas now.

McVey crouched beyond a boulder, within an easy stone's throw of the shack. He'd been there for a quarter hour now, wondering just how he should handle it. He dared not endanger Katherine by rushing in with drawn gun. The two men with her were apt to start shooting, and she might be hit.

McVey had left his dun horse hidden in a chaparral thicket just inside the gulch entrance. Mallard's hired men weren't alert. He kept waiting, but neither came out to look around.

Three horses, one with a side-saddle, stood ground-hitched at the far side of the shack. McVey couldn't understand why they hadn't been off-saddled, unless it was because the two men expected to move on shortly. McVey considered the horses for a time, then began working his way toward them. The gulch was studded with rocks and over-grown with brush, so he had plenty of cover. And the horses were spiritless livery stable stock that didn't spook at his stealthy approach.

McVey heard men's drunken voices inside the shack as he gathered up the trailing reins. He silently cursed Clint Mallard for sending Katherine off to such a place with two such hardcases. He led the animals deeper into the gulch, circling the other ramshackle buildings, and tethered them beyond sight of the shack.

Turning back, he saw the shack door open and a thick-bodied man—Stace Black, he guessed—step out. McVey shrank into the shadows along the nearest building. The man outside the shack muttered loudly, in a whiskey thick voice, "Hell. You heard right! They did drift off."

A second man appeared, silhouetted by the light from the fireplace.

He was rail-thin. McVey remembered the squinted eyes, the hooked nose, the lank face of Hook Valmer.

"Go rustle 'em," Hook growled. "What if we'd need 'em in a hurry?"

"Me go after 'em—and leave you alone with the girl?"

"Don't be a fool, Stace. I'm not forgetting she's Mallard's woman!"

"All right," Stace growled. "I'll rustle 'em."

McVey knew it was the best chance he'd get, with the two outside at once. He had his gun in his hand, and now cocked it. "Stand still," he called out. "Or neither of you'll ride anywhere again!"

Stace Black froze. "What the hell?" he muttered.

Hook Valmer yelled, "It's that devil McVey. Watch it, Stace!"

Both men grabbed for their guns.

Stace Black fired one wild shot before McVey let the hammer of his weapon fall. McVey's slug tore into Stace's thick body, and the man screamed. The scream turned into a shriek, then Stace hit the ground and lay still. Hook Valmer fired twice, then backed around the corner of the shack, and McVey wasted two shots. Hook's third bullet tore through the plank wall, within inches of McVey. His fourth would have targetted the man from Oregon had he not flung himself to the ground.

Hook must have thought he'd killed or wounded his man, for he came from behind the shack and took a couple of steps forward. McVey fired from his prone position, and Hook staggered back and fell against the front of the shack. He'd dropped his gun, and now started to stoop for it.

McVey came to his feet, saying, "Go ahead, Hook. Pick it up and I'll kill you!"

He walked toward the man, and Hook, his right arm hanging limp, stopped reaching with his left hand. He leaned back against the shack, his lank face stiff with pain and ugly with hate. He began

to curse McVey. Katherine came to the door.

At sight of her, McVey had a wild impulse to kill Hook Valmer.

Her bronze hair was in disarray. Her dress was torn, ripped so that her one shoulder was bare. She looked dazed. "Ed—" she gasped. "Oh, Ed!"

"This one," McVey said, wildly. "Did he lay hands on you?"

"It's all right, Ed," she said huskily. "I tried to get away, and they—well, their fear of Mallard kept them from really harming me. Ed, you came. I was afraid you wouldn't. If you hadn't finally come—"

"I'm taking you away from here," he broke in. "We're heading for Oregon." He stared at her. "Don't you have a coat? Didn't they give you a chance to put on warm clothes?"

She had a coat, and turned back to get it.

McVey swung on Hook Valmer, who still cursed him obscenely. "Tell Mallard I'll kill him if he tries to get her back," he said savagely. "You hear?"

"He'll get her back, McVey," Hook Valmer muttered. "He'll come after you—all the way to Oregon. And I'll be with him, damn you."

McVey stopped the cursing that followed. He downed Hook Valmer with a blow of his gun barrel. He thrust the weapon into his mackinaw pocket, crossed to where Stace Black lay dead and picked up his gun. Only one shot had been fired from it, and, better still, McVey found it to be the Colt that had been taken off him when his money was stolen. Katherine appeared, her coat on now. McVey told her to wait there.

He went for the horse rigged with the side-saddle.

Returning, he helped her mount and then, on their way out of the gulch, got his dun from the chaparral.

THEY took to the road, followed it north. McVey wanted to put as many miles as possible between them and the gulch. He feared that Hook Valmer had spoken the truth—that Mallard would come after the girl. He told her about his trip to Trinity to force the Eberts brothers to talk, and about his confronting Clint Mallard. And about the girl, and the promise he'd made her.

"You don't want to go back there?" he said.

"No," Katherine cried. "I never want to see that place again!"

"About Mallard," McVey went on. "I didn't finish with him, as you wanted. The girl—well, she had me in a corner. She made me give my word that I'd take you away and not harm Mallard."

Katherine nodded. "It's all right, Ed," she said. "Somehow, I'm glad. I was crazy to want him killed, bad as he is. I've not the right to say that he should be put to death—and ask you to be the executioner." She turned her face to McVey, and it was changed from when he first had seen it. The hard chill look was gone from her eyes. "Try to understand," she begged. "Sometimes when a woman loses her husband—"

"I understand, Katherine," McVey said gently. "Don't talk about it."

"But now you're burdened with me."

"Burdened?" he said, smiling at her. "Well, maybe. But I'm not complaining."

He was thinking of the long trail ahead, the days and nights that would pass before they reached his ranch north of the Rogue. He wouldn't grow weary of such a burden. . . .

But as dawn came, McVey found himself glancing back over his shoulder from time to time. It was too soon for pursuit. He had only Hook Valmer's word that there would be one. But an uneasy feeling grew in him, and wouldn't be downed.

Katherine did not protest. She didn't question McVey about his haste. But she began to droop. There were blue shadows beneath her eyes, and a tight look formed about her mouth. The strain was telling on her.

Like McVey, she'd gotten no sleep last night. She'd had no rest during the day, except for an occasional brief halt along the trail. The longest had been at Mormon Bar, where McVey bought two fresh horses and paid the seller to send Katherine's mount back to Glennon's livery barn at Palisade City. The dun was trail-weary, but McVey wouldn't leave it behind. He stripped off its rigging, rubbed it down, then packed it with provisions, camp gear, and blankets that he'd bought at a general store.

Mormon Bar was twenty miles behind. It was now late in the afternoon. McVey didn't halt until darkness came.

He helped Katherine dismount, cared for the horses, gathered brush for a fire. When he opened the pack he gave Katherine a comb and a bar of scented soap, saying with a grin, "I thought you'd need them."

She brightened, thanked him with a smile, and, while he rustled up a meal, she washed up at the nearby creek and re-arranged her bronze-colored hair. She seemed untroubled and ate hungrily.

"You think he'll come after us, don't you?" she said finally.

"Just a hunch," McVey admitted. "But we'll be safe once we reach Oregon. I have friends there."

"I'm not afraid, Ed. Somehow, when I'm with you I feel more at ease than I ever felt in my life."

Their eyes met across the fire.

McVey felt a quiver shoot through him. He tried to hide his sudden rush of feelings by taking out and filling his pipe. He lit it with a burning brand from the fire.

He said finally, "You've had a hard time of it, and tomorrow will be another long day in the saddle. I'll get your blankets."

He spread them out by the fire, then, biting down hard on the stem of his pipe, and walked over to the horses as though to make sure they were secure on their ropes. His pipe smoked out, he returned and piled more brush on the fire. Katherine lay in her blankets, her eyes closed.

McVey hunkered down on the far side of the fire for a time, smoking again, then finally took to his own blankets. He was aching tired, but he remained wakeful. It was the girl's nearness that kept him from sleeping.

"Ed?"

"Yes, Katherine?" he said, surprised that she was awake.

"I keep wondering about—about us," she said. "About our bargain."

"I didn't keep my end of it," he told her. "If I had—if I'd settled with Mallard—we wouldn't need to be running like this."

"Then my part of the bargain . . .?"

"I can't hold you to it, can I?"

She was silent a moment, then said softly, "No, I suppose not."

He heard her sigh, and guessed that it was with relief. Then he heard her turn on her side, and shortly knew that she was asleep. He thought, *She expected me to hold her to it.* He told himself that he'd been a fool not to have settled with Clint Mallard.

CHAPTER SIX

The Long Trail Home

FOR McVey, the trail was not a difficult one. He'd traveled it a score of times, and he'd brought half a dozen herds of Oregon cattle down it. But he was bothered by his hunch. His uneasiness grew despite the miles he was put-

ting between himself and Palisade City. Katherine on the other hand was affected in reverse manner. The trail marked her. Her face thinned down, the shadows beneath her eyes were more pronounced. But at the end of each day's ride, tired as she was, she seemed less troubled, more cheerful. She watched McVey with smiling eyes. Sometimes he caught the smile on her lips.

She puzzled him, and his uneasiness made him touchy.

He began to think she considered their trip—their flight, it seemed to him—something of a lark. The fourth night, after starting the fire, he said, his voice harsh: "What amuses you, anyway?"

Katherine was fixing the meals now.

She looked up, laughing. "I keep thinking how safe a girl is with you, Ed," she said. "I was brought up to be wary of strange men, and yet with you—"

"Maybe I respect the way you were brought up."

"All right, Ed," Katherine said, her amusement fading. "I'm sorry. I'll not have such thoughts from now on. I'll be the sedate lady."

But her smile returned as she turned back to placing bacon in the skillet. . . .

They saw towering Mount Shasta, rode through Shasta City and Whiskeytown without stopping. They paused at Tower House on Clear Creek for a meal. Before them rose craggy mountains, and the shimmering bulk of Old Baldy. And beyond Tower House, there was no road. No wagons had ever traversed the uplands. They left spring behind too, for in the mountains snow swirled and the wind howled. They followed a narrow trail through tall firs and tamaracks, and traveled through the dark forests of Trinity Creek. Another day's travel brought them to Scott Valley, and the mining camp of Yreka. They reached the town shortly after dark.

They had supper at the Yreka Hotel and State House on Miner Street, but then found there was only one available room. McVey signed the register "Mr. & Mrs. Ed McVey," and took Katherine up to the room. He went down to stable the horses, then returned to find her abed and asleep.

He tiptoed about the room, took the one chair over to the window. He straddled it, folded his arms across the back, and, when he slept, pillowed his head on his arms. He slept by fits and jerks, but tonight it was not the girl's nearness that bothered him. It was his feeling of uneasiness. His hunch was stronger than ever.

It was about three in the morning when McVey heard a rider coming along Miner Street. He peered down into the darkness. He could see that the horse was dead-beat, that the man slumped in the saddle. The rider was lank-figured with his right arm bandaged and in a sling. His face was obscure, but McVey thought bleakly, *Hook Valmer!*

A chill crept into him.

It was not born of a fear of Hook, but of the knowledge that the hardcase would not have come so far alone. Clint Mallard and some others were on the way. Hook Valmer was just scouting ahead to locate the quarry.

McVey rose, crossed to the bed, touched Katherine's shoulder.

She knew at once. "He's come?" she asked.

"It's just Hook Valmer. But Mallard can't be far behind."

"What will we do, Ed?"

"Get away from here—fast," he told her.

THEY rode out of Yreka an hour later, and, though a jaded roan horse stood ground-hitched before the hotel, McVey saw nothing more of Hook Valmer. They



Riders were coming fast along their back-trail.

W. H. NELSON

headed toward the Klamath River, fording it in the early part of the morning. The Oregon line was less than a dozen miles ahead. But at mid-day, making a halt to rest the horses, they saw riders coming fast along their back-trail.

McVey swore. He felt like groaning.

He swung off the trail, into the timber, calling out, "Katherine, keep close."

But they were seen, and the half dozen horsemen came after them at a gallop. McVey paused to look back, and saw Hook Valmer in the lead. Clint Mallard was right behind the crippled hardcase, and the four others followed close. A rifle cracked, and its slug ripped through the trees just behind McVey.

He was riding his big dun and towing the sorrel under pack, but now he had to

cast off the spare animal. Katherine was keeping up on her gray, but was swinging off to his left as the timber grew thicker. He lost sight of her a moment later, so he shouted to her. He heard her cry out, "Go on, Ed— Go on! I'm all right!"

The rifle cracked again, and a slug whined close.

McVey crashed through brush and the dun jumped a rotting tree trunk that lay across the trail. Gloom closed in. It was semi-dark here, the dense growth overhead shutting out the sun. A man yelled, "Spread out! Keep him ducking back around us." It was Hook Valmer yelling. He sounded crazy mad.

McVey had his gun in his fist, but he had too few loads to waste shooting be-

fore he had steady targets. He no longer saw or heard Katherine, and he had a moment's panic thinking what might happen to her if he were killed. He kept dodging trees and crashing through brush for perhaps half a mile. Then, remembering what Hook Valmer had shouted, he saw that the hardcase had pointed out his one way of escape.

He bore sharply to the right, running the dun hard for perhaps half a mile. The ground began to slope away, and the trees became less dense. McVey turned the dun again, heading now back toward his starting point. He bent low over the dun's neck, hoping to by-pass the man-hunters. But suddenly a rider loomed over to his right.

It was Hook Valmer, riding with his reins in his teeth so that his one good hand could use a gun. His squint eyes glinted with hate, and he fired at once. McVey felt the slug tear through his mackinaw. He swung his gun on Hook, fired, and the hardcase uttered a wild shriek. Hook was toppling from the saddle as McVey raced on.

A second rider appeared directly ahead, but got no chance to level his gun. McVey rode at him, leaned from the saddle, struck down his gun barrel. The blow landed just above the right ear, and the man went slack. McVey looked back and saw him pitched to the ground as his horse suddenly bucked.

There were still four of the crowd, one of them Clint Mallard, prowling through that gloomy forest. Two called back and forth as they searched, but McVey could tell by their voices that they were still traveling in the opposite direction. He heard a racket behind him, looked back, saw the man with the rifle appear briefly among the trees. He fired a backward shot, and missed. When McVey looked back again, he didn't see the rifleman.

A short distance farther, he reined in beside a mammoth tree trunk. His heart

pounded against his ribs, and, despite the chill mountain air, he was drenched with sweat. He was blowing as hard as the dun. He felt despair weigh him down, unable to believe that his luck would hold. But McVey began to consider the man he was up against, and quickly concluded that Mallard, a man who lived by his wits, wouldn't be up front in the search. Mallard was paying those toughs to take the risks. He was well back, out of bullet range, keeping his own skin safe. McVey thought, *He's waiting back here, back where the chase started!* He was as certain of that as he'd ever been certain of anything.

HE SWUNG down from the saddle, led the dun by its reins. He moved forward at a crouch, peering into the forest darkness. Voices called to and fro, far off, but even though he couldn't recognize one from another, McVey knew that none was Mallard's.

He was not far from the beaten trail Katherine and he had traveled when he heard her voice. He kept silent, for the girl was calling not his, but Mallard's name. Her estimate of the man was the same as his own; she too expected him to be well back. But why she should be seeking the man, McVey couldn't guess.

Then from somewhere among the deep shadows, Mallard answered. He called to the girl. McVey's hand tightened on his gun. He strained to gauge the man's direction. But he heard only Katherine now, calling out, "Clint, let him go. I'll go back. I'll do anything. Just let him go!"

McVey swore under his breath.

Yet he felt a queer pleasure, too. Katherine had only a woman's way to help him. And he meant that much to her.

Mallard finally answered, "You fool, do you think I've come here just for you?" He swore with great heat. "McVey's dangerous. He could come back to

Palisade and ruin me with what he knows. I followed him, not you, and I'm not leaving until my men gun him down!"

McVey's broad mouth stretched in a mirthless grin.

He had Mallard placed now, by ear, and in a minute would see him.

Leaving his horse behind, he worked forward, and saw Mallard creeping up on Katherine. She was still mounted, but holding her horse in. She was looking about, but was unaware that Mallard was coming up behind her. Whatever his reason for coming up-trail, the man still wanted her. He wanted her as badly as McVey wanted her, and that was something about Clint Mallard that Ed McVey could understand.

McVey called, "Far enough, Mallard. Turn around."

Mallard stopped short, his head snapping around. He was so startled, his eyes opened wide. McVey could see white showing all around the eyeballs. The man's face turned gray. He stood frozen like that for an instant. Then he began to run.

McVey's gun came up.

Mallard's back, the shoulders hunched from fright, was an easy target. But Katherine cried, "No, Ed—no!"

He whipped a glance her way. She had swung her horse about, was riding toward him. "Don't!" she gasped. "It's the thing you wanted to avoid! You'll never forgive yourself, Ed. You may even blame me—later!"

McVey was rattled.

He looked after Mallard, and the man had reached his horse over in a clump of brush. He tried to mount, but the animal shied away. Mallard's foot slipped from the stirrup, and he fell to the ground. He was up at once, a gun in his hand, facing McVey. It must have been that he believed McVey was ready to shoot. Mal-

lard began firing, as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and squeeze.

His third slug found McVey, creasing his left side.

McVey took aim, fired, and he knew, as Mallard fell dead, that he would have no regrets. It was no different than killing a mad dog.

McVey went back for his horse, and they rode out of there fast—before the other members of Mallard's crowd could close in on them. They'd lost their pack horse, but now they rode without fear. There was no pursuit. . . .

They reached Hungry Creek, passed a cairn marking the California - Oregon boundary, and finally overtook a freighting outfit trailing back from Yreka. The packers were hurrying their unladen mules. They rode with rifles across their saddles. The Modocs were on the war path between the Klamath and Rogue Rivers. "Lucky you folks didn't meet up with any Injuns," one of the packers told McVey and Katherine.

They exchanged a look and a strained smile that silently carried a message.

The next day they parted from the outfit, turned into a valley between wooded hills. There was a clearwater stream—and a loghouse, corrals and a barn. Katherine asked, "What place is this?"

"Home," said McVey. "Our home, if you'll have it that way."

"I'd have it that way," Katherine replied, in a choked-up voice. "But are you sure, Ed, that you really want me?"

He gave her a look that was answer enough. There was a little town a dozen miles farther north, and it boasted a church and a parson. They could make it there and back by sundown if they took fresh horses. McVey guessed it wouldn't be too much of a ride after the hard trail they'd already traveled. And the end of it would be worthwhile.

(Continued from page 34)

firing as he fell. The .30—30 blasted with the roar of pistols, and gunfire was a solid reverberation along the length of the ravine. He had levered and fired again and again, without realizing he was doing it. . . .

Frank Ward had fallen free of his mount, face down in the dust, without George knowing whose bullet had got him. A horse was down, kicking in agony. George retrieved Ward's .45 and shot the horse in the head. Then his thoughts cleared and he realized that the other rider had fled without firing a shot, and that Jane Calvert was crumpled in a heap at the edge of the clearing.

He found Hugh McNair slumped against the bole of a jack pine. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and as George raised him it came in a sudden flood for a moment, covering his shirt. McNair breathed more easily then and in a second his eyes opened and focused on George's face. Dimly Frazier realized that the man must have lost much blood even before this final shooting.

"You were right about not going back on a guy no matter what," McNair said slowly. "It ain't really what the other guy is that counts. She was a tramp, like I said, but you had to stick anyway. It's you, and what you're really like inside, that counts. I guess I'm a little slow, eh George?"

Hugh McNair was dead when George laid his head down against the pine needles that covered the ground. But his words stayed in George Frazier's mind as George turned to the body of the girl, and he realized how very much more McNair's words could mean. As he looked at her face he saw the beauty there, and the goodness. They were still there, as they had always been for him. As long as she lived, he had not betrayed them. . . .

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RUN-AWAY HERO

(Continued from page 41)

WITH a startling clarity, Jeff saw what he had to do, and strangely enough, it was suddenly easy. It was so easy, it amazed him. If a man didn't want to run away, he just didn't run. That was all. He faced things, and called them by name.

"It was murder," Jeff heard himself saying, "and I had no part in it. I'm going to see the sheriff. I'm going—"

He had no opportunity to say anything more. Ollie clawed up his gun. Grover jerked to his feet. Jeff lunged forward, shoved against the table. The full weight of it threw Grover off balance and the table's edge jarred against Ollie's lifting gun. Ollie's shot was wide, and before he could fire again Jeff had dived for the man and carried him to the floor. Ollie fired once more as they went down. Jeff was vaguely conscious of Grover's scream. He grabbed at Ollie's gun.

Fingers clawed at his eyes. They raked bloody gashes in his cheek. Jeff caught Ollie's gun wrist and held on. He heard the gun explode a third time. He tried to stay on top of Ollie. He reached with his free hand for the man's throat.

Jeff loosened his hold on Ollie's body. He twisted away, came to his feet, and then lunged straight at the man. He stabbed a blow at Ollie's face. He followed this with another. Ollie reeled backwards. He half stumbled over a chair.

Jeff ducked, caught the chair as Ollie swung it. He twisted it away from Ollie's grasp and smashed it at Ollie's head. He bulled in, then, as Ollie fell away. His fist ripped twice into Ollie's face and Ollie went to the floor. He lay there face down, without moving.

Jeff Branca mopped a hand across his face. He was out of breath. One cheek was bloody from Ollie's scratches. His knuckles were raw, bleeding. There were other bruises on his body but he was only

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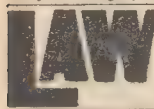
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vaguely aware of them. He stared down at Ollie and then turned toward the side of the room where Grover was still standing. A shot from Ollie's gun had kept Grover out of the fight, and even as Jeff looked that way, Grover's knees folded and he fell to the floor.

"This is better than running away," Jeff told himself. "Even if there had been some other ending; this way is best."

He found a rope. He tied Ollie's wrists and legs, made a brief examination of Grover, then left the cabin to see Ollie's wife and to tell her what had happened.

* * *

"I don't get it," said the sheriff. "Why didn't you speak up when we were there?"

"I was afraid to," said Jeff, honestly.

"It doesn't make sense," Rutgers insisted. "You were afraid to speak up when you had plenty of help, but alone, with two dangerous men, you jumped them."

Jeff nodded. "That's right."

"And what's this trip back to San Esteban which you seem to feel you have to make? As I told you, you can go to work running the Two-M ranch for Menninger's widow. Or if you want a place of your own, there are several—"

"We will talk about that," said Jeff Branca, "when I return. There is a man in San Esteban I want to see. His name is Hubbard."

"At least," said the sheriff, "I'm glad my name isn't Hubbard."

Jeff Branca grinned. He left the sheriff's office. He stepped out on the street. It was strange how different he felt. And it was no false feeling this time. It was solid. Real. He might know fear again, but he had learned how to deal with it. He had learned to pull it out and look it in the face and laugh at it. There was a new spring in his step as he started up the street toward the stable.

SNAKEHEAD'S PARDNER

(Continued from page 71)

Big Red's face stiffened as he choked out something unintelligible. His lips twisted. Sweat ran down his face.

"Get back there," said Snakehead softly. "The Chink's thirsty."

BIG RED edged back and moved around behind the bar. He stood swaying, blood oozing from his shoulder and wrist. His cheeks had grown flabby and ash-colored.

Suddenly he screamed a hoarse oath of defiance. His hand came up. It had the gun the barkeep had cached under the bar. Snakehead staggered to one side, fired. Big Red whirled around, down the length of the bar.

Snakehead fired again as Big Red went down on his knees and crawled toward the batwing doors. Two men ran in front of the big broken window beside the doors, snapped two shots at Snakehead and dodged back out of sight.

Then Snakehead caved in. The floor was wet under him and he couldn't move. He wanted to stretch out, forget Big Red, forget everything, and escape into endless sleep. But he couldn't do that. Big Red was still alive.

Big Red rolled over, the front of him a red smear. His face grinned bloodily as he lifted his .45. It seemed to roar right in Snakehead's face. A red haze fell across his eyes then, and he felt what life was in him pouring out fast.

And Big Red was crawling further away. He was right up against the batwing doors now, clawing, trying to open them. He kept trying, then lay still.

His body was covered, Snakehead knew, by his gunsels hiding just outside the window. They couldn't see Snakehead or the Chink, but they could cover Big Red.

A terrible sickness was in him as he saw that Big Red was still alive. He tried again to lift his gun, but he couldn't.

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"Hey—" he managed a whisper. "Hey, Chinee-boy. That Big Red's tough. He might get away from us yet . . ."

He heard the Chink's answer. "No!"

The word sent a curious chill along Snakehead's spine.

He saw the Chink walk across the saloon floor, directly into the line of fire of the blacklegs hiding outside the window. He looked like a yellow skeleton covered with old bloody rags.

Shots thundered outside. Snakehead watched the Chink's body bounce and jerk as the slugs tore into him. The Chink kept on walking until he reached Big Red and dropped down beside him. Big Red tried to grab him, but couldn't.

More shots sounded. The Chink seemed to shrink down flat against the floor. A red blur curtained Snakehead's eyes, but he could see enough to know what the Chink was doing. He had that pigtail ripped off Big Red's vest. That was what he wanted. His damned pigtail . . .

Snakehead grunted. The Chink had that pigtail and he was wrapping and twisting it around Big Red's neck. Big Red was choking, beating his boots against the wall. The kicking motions slowed down and died. Snakehead heard more shots, the sounds of boots running on boardwalk.

The Chink was finished. He half-rose, flipped around in the air, his face a deathly grin. The pigtail came away from Big Red's swollen neck, and the Chink held it tightly in his hand as he flopped on his face.

Snakehead groaned as he felt his chin sink down into the sawdust. He heard boots clattering on the floor. A shot splintered the wood, but he knew he wouldn't feel anything anymore.

"Guess we both got our pigtails back," he was thinking. "Much obliged to yuh . . . Much obliged fer the lift . . . Chinee-boy . . ."

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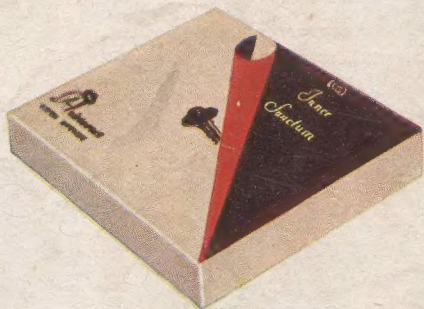
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